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GEARS OF WAR 4

A NEW BEGINNING BRINGS SUSPENSE BACK TO THE BELOVED SERIES

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A Glorious Saturday

ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
andy@gameinformer.com

Read my column or comment on this letter at gameinformer.com/mag or follow @GI_AndyMc

It's early; the sun is still breaking through the morning fog. The house is filled with the smell of freshly roasted coffee, and my dog gently throws a ball repeatedly at my feet.

We already played, but Barnaby rarely gives up on the game. He has a lot in common with me, as I've already turned on my PC and fired up Darkest Dungeon. My most recent addiction, well scratch that...I've always hated the word addiction when it comes to games. I prefer to say that I'm just extremely dedicated. It puts my love of games in a better light. Right now, I'm "dedicated" to Darkest Dungeon in the morning. Nothing quite like waking up to a dungeon crawl where most of my party is likely doomed to a gruesome death or some other malady.

Like most people, I find that games are a part of my day-to-day. After running some errands to get life things done, I decide my afternoon needs to be dedicated (there's that word again) to finishing Firewatch. All my friends are talking about it.

"OMG, the ending is the worst," is heard repeatedly, but other friends promise me the journey is worth it despite its flaws. I travel the forest as Henry, and while I have some minor issues, I regret nothing. Firewatch is a great game.

After dinner with the family, and more time throwing that ball for the dog, I fire up my PlayStation and find myself bathed in the light of Destiny. It's my current comfort food. I'm overly dedicated to it. Sure, the game ran out of content long ago, but I'm a creature of habit. I love what I love.

Games today are such amazing things. As a kid, I plowed through them like it was a race. Could I defeat every game that ever came out on the Nintendo Entertainment System? I sure tried, and it was glorious. These days, I tend to go less for how many things can I knock out as quickly as I can, and more with a "how many games can I savor?" approach.

It's late. Time for bed. I fade out of consciousness thinking that tomorrow I might play XCOM 2 or Far Cry Primal to see if I should dedicate more time to them. My dog licks my face. He probably wants to play too.

Games are an important part of our lives (and my dog's apparently). Make sure you take the time to sit back and enjoy them.

Enjoy the issue.

Cheers,

38 Gears Of War 4
After its reveal at E3, we were left with more questions than answers about the next entry in the Gears of War series. In our exclusive look we answer many of those questions to see how the series is making a return to its suspenseful roots, and find out where the game takes place on the Gears timeline. We also learn more about its new protagonist, JD, and his two partners.

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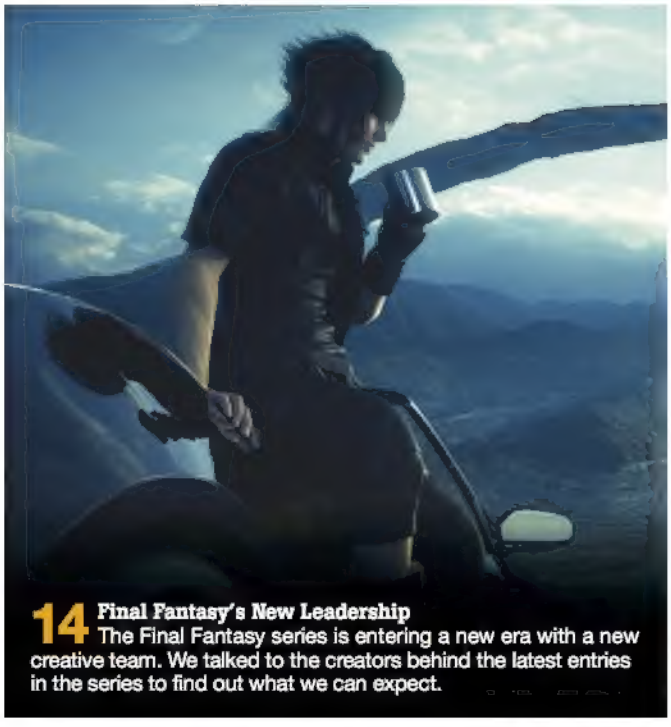
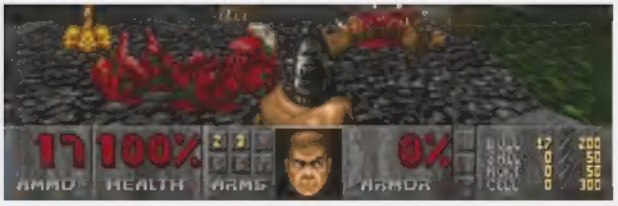


14 Final Fantasy's New Leadership
The Final Fantasy series is entering a new era with a new creative team. We talked to the creators behind the latest entries in the series to find out what we can expect.



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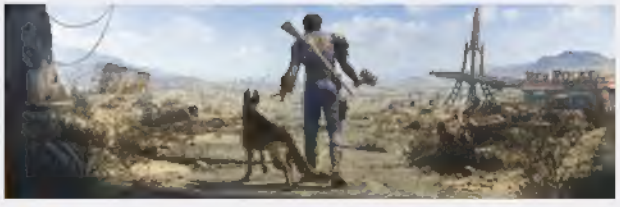
Creator Jonathan Blow reveals the mystery of the pee bottle (and his game).

28 Massive: Blade & Soul
Blade & Soul surprised us with its impressive, flashy, in-depth combat.

32 Interview: Jeff Kaplan
Jeff Kaplan has been with Blizzard for years and is currently bringing Overwatch to life. We talked to him about his history and his instrumental role in the development of the Warcraft universe.



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This year's memorable quotes from the design-focused conference.

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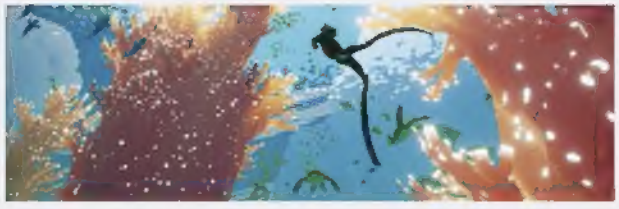
We played the new Star Fox for Wii U, and spoke to Shigeru Miyamoto about it.



68 Abzû
Journey's artists return with beautiful undersea exploration on PlayStation 4.

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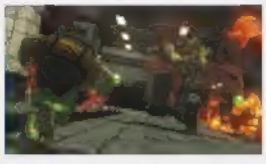
Darksiders creator Joe Madureira is returning to his comic book roots with a continuation of his unfinished Battle Chasers series in the form of a turn-based RPG.



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Bayonetta's creators bring their action expertise to the Testudinata ninjas.

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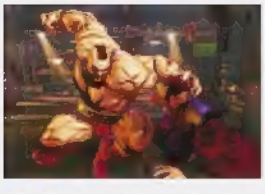
How does the Far Cry series fare without guns? Find out here.



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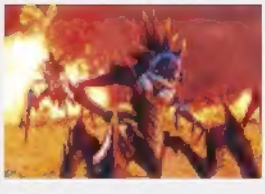
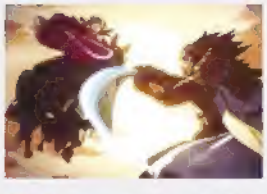
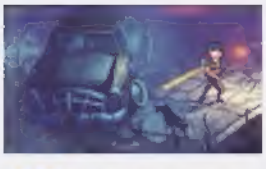


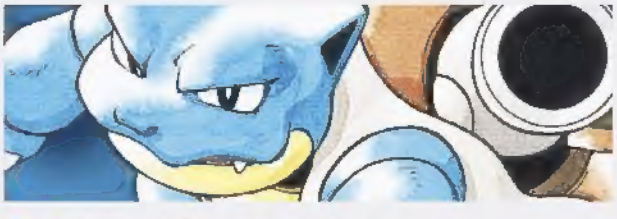
90 XCOM 2
Firaxis' brutal, but undeniably entertaining alien-invasion sim returns.



91 Fire Emblem Fates
We have our reviews of both versions of the new Fire Emblem.



88 The Flame In The Flood
Former BioShock developers banded together for something very different.



94 Classic: Pokémon Red & Blue
We look back at the first games in the series as Pokémon celebrates 20 years.

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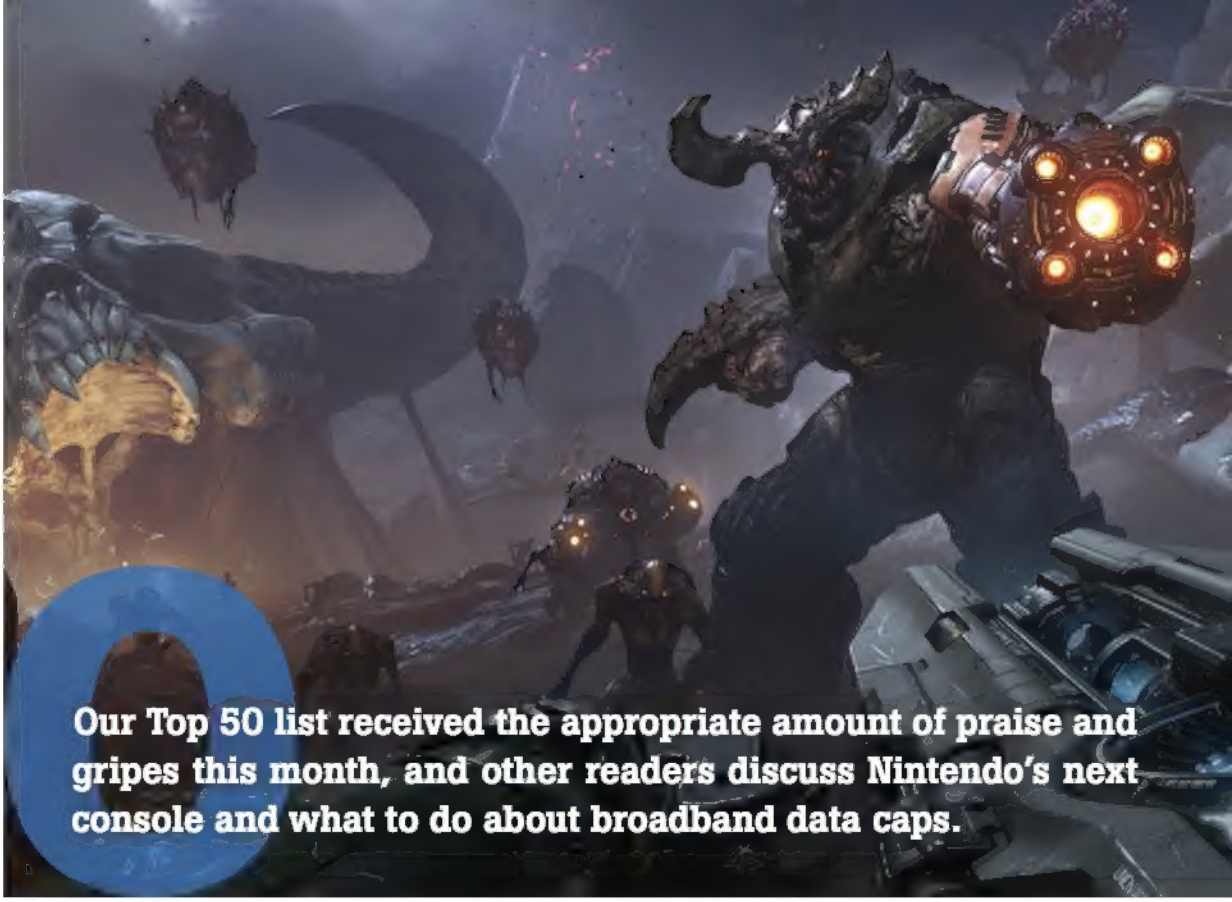


Our Top 50 list received the appropriate amount of praise and gripes this month, and other readers discuss Nintendo's next console and what to do about broadband data caps.

Agree To Disagree

I just read your Top 50 Games of 2015 feature (issue 274) and thought it was great. I always enjoy the issue that comes after the Top 50, which includes all the letters about how biased you are and how certain companies are paying you to represent them. These people seem to forget our hobby is subjective. Just because you like a game and I don't doesn't mean that one of us is corrupt or incompetent; it's just a difference in opinion. Honestly, that's what this magazine is here to do – give us opinions on games so that we can make educated purchasing decisions. We all have different views, and we should use them to have an open discussion on why we like certain games or why we don't. But please keep printing the hate mail as it provides great entertainment when sitting on my throne.

Bryan
San Antonio, TX

When you state it that eloquently, Bryan, getting angry over whose favorite games are "better" just seems downright foolish. Nevertheless, choosing our list of winners was no easy task, and incited a week of arguments in the G.I. office. We can't blame readers for disagreeing with our opinions, but we can publish the most cantankerous replies for your personal amusement.

...Or Not

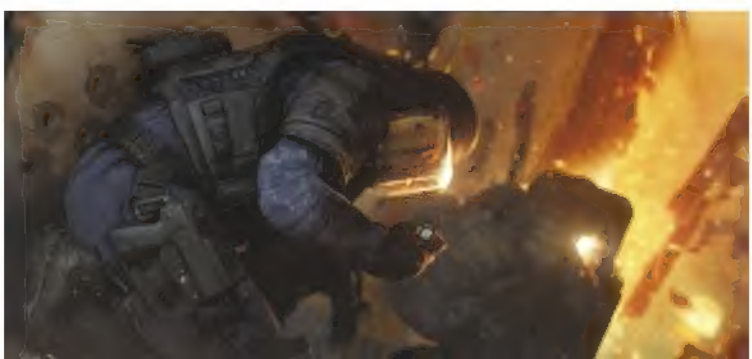
You guys are so far up your own butts for snubbing Rainbow Six Siege on the Top 50. Let's put Assassin's Creed and Call of Duty in there for the millionth time instead! Seriously, Siege is an incredibly unique, refreshing, and challenging shooter, but it gets no love. It's easy to play, but hard to master, and the challenge and strategy are what offer content. It never gets old; the game is easily worth $60.

Tony W.
via email

Andy, Miller, and Wade are idiots for choosing Destiny: The Taken King as their GOTY. A few staff members chose games like Bloodborne, Fallout 4, and Batman: Arkham Knight, which I can actually respect because those are pretty good games – they aren't just repackaged with new content that should have been included in the initial release in 2014! Overall, you guys got it right. The Witcher 3 was hands-down game of the year; I read an article that stated it had close to 130 GOTY awards, and Fallout 4 was second with like 26. I mean, it's not even close. I played a lot of good games this year, but The Witcher 3 is one of the best I have ever played. Destiny is not an all-time great game; it's a good time-waster, but it has no real staying power or substance. I am not usually one to insult someone for their opinion, but in this case I have no choice.

Daniel Lindsey
via email

Actually, you do have a choice, Daniel. We don't know how someone can be "wrong" about what their favorite game of the year is, but the number of awards a title wins shouldn't have any effect on your enjoyment of it, and it certainly doesn't factor into whether a game makes our list or not. As for Rainbow Six, the thrill of Siege's combat got some love in our Top 10 Moments list, even if the shallow customization and dearth of content (narrowly) kept it from making the Top 50.



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Primal Instinct

I've been addicted to the Far Cry franchise since day one. Far Cry 4 was not flawless, but still amazing to me. After reading the Far Cry Primal preview in issue 274, I'm let down by the new take on the franchise. Going to the caveman era seems pointless. You tame animals and upgrade your bow and other melee weapons. What other weapons? A rock? What enemy outposts will you conquer? A cave or animal-skin tent? I know I shouldn't judge a game until I play it, but my guess is it will fail to compare to the other great Far Cry titles. Primal seems like a step back in a time where developers need to step up. I'll still give it a try, but I'll probably rent it or wait for it to hit the bargain bin. Hopefully I'm dead wrong – I'll gladly admit so and eat my humble pie!

Cody Valentine
via email

You're not the only one to raise an eyebrow at Far Cry Primal's prehistoric setting, Cody. However, would expanding Far Cry's already massive open-world setting or adding more guns to the series' bloated arsenal qualify as stepping up? Or is taking the series in a completely new direction the more ambitious venture? Either way, Far Cry Primal is certainly a gamble; you can decide for yourself if it paid off by reading our review on page 82.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"Have any of you played God of War III?!."

Sure have!

"Do you think Activision will ever remaster Call of Duty 4 for the PS4 and Xbox One?"

Actually, we're surprised they haven't already.

"The Division just looks like more must group must be social BS to me?"

Huh?

Worst News Tip Of The Month:

"For the next top ten you should do Top Ten Dogs In Gaming, it'll be a hit man."

Worst Opening Line To A Feedback Letter:

"I know here's not the place to talk about it, but I have no one to complain about this issue."

Question Of The Month:

What is your go-to game recommendation for new players, and why?

PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

(Left) This month we took a trip to Vancouver, Canada to see The Coalition's new approach to Gears of War. Read all about it on page 38. **(Right)** Andy visited Austin-based developer Certain Affinity. Back row: Alex Chrisman, David Mertz, Laura Zimmermann, Matt Oztalay and president Max Hoberman. Front row: Deborah Beckman, Corey May (of AC fame), and Mojdeh Ghartbi.

- Top 50 Cheers/Jeers
- Most Played Games In 2015
- Witcher 3 Love
- Destiny Haters
- Difficulty Of Difficulty Kudos

Where Does The Time Go?

[illegible]

Jordan Smith

What's NX?

I found your speculation on the Nintendo NX to be quite interesting (What We Want From The Nintendo NX, Issue 274). In addition to the essentials you mentioned, I'd like to see Nintendo put an end to region locking. The archaic practice does nothing but stop us from importing a few games that aren't localized for us, so we don't get to play them and Nintendo misses some potential sales. Although the decision of region locking won't make or break the NX, it would certainly be an easy way for Nintendo to show that it's listening to fans.

Bobby Miller
via email

One point in your Nintendo NX article made me scratch my head in puzzlement. It stated that Nintendo filed a patent for a controller dominated by a touchscreen, two analog sticks, shoulder buttons, built-in Wi-Fi, cross-play functionality – what does that remind me of? Oh yeah, the PlayStation Vita. And look where it is now: The lack of marketing, shelf presence, and developer support has left it with one foot in the grave. Do you think Nintendo can make it work after Sony seems to have failed?

Jeff Dabbs
via email

The (still theoretical) Nintendo NX controller certainly sounds a lot like Sony's Vita, but you shouldn't take the similarities as a portent of doom. Unlike Sony, Nintendo has a long history of successful and well-supported handhelds dating all the way back to the original Game Boy. While it's still possible that nothing may come of the patent, if Nintendo could pair a multi-functional controller with a beefier home console, it could offer players the best of both worlds in a single package.

(Left) Andy recently got a tour of the National Videogame Museum in Frisco, Texas, where co-founder Joe Santulli showed him the world's biggest Pong machine (Right) We managed to pry some of the fine folks at Giant Squid away from Abzû just long enough to take this pic

If you're playing with cigarettes, you're harming your teeth.
Smoking cigarettes can cause serious gum disease that makes you more likely to lose your teeth than someone who doesn't smoke.
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gallery

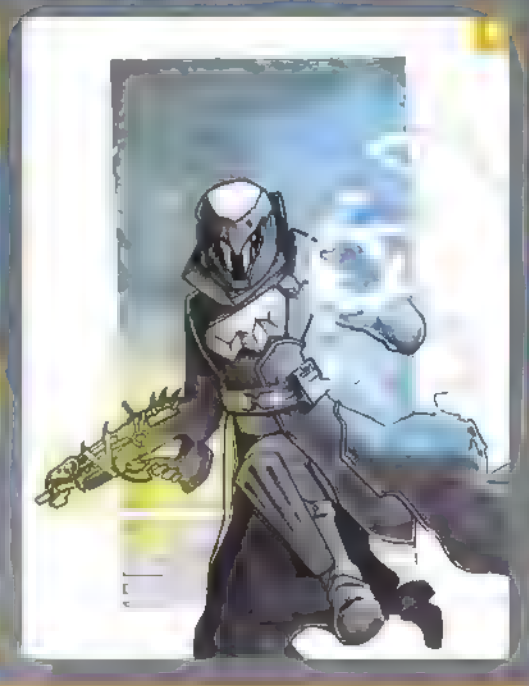
1 Amberly Neal
This art just makes us want a Shadow of Mordor sequel. What could Monolith be working on next...

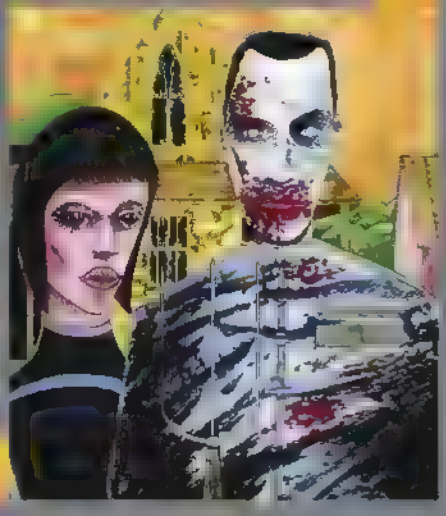
2 Jake Fitzgerald
As far as the best blue, jawless characters go, Raziel is definitely in the top 10

3 Adam Silver
Sorry, guys: Luigi's Mansion already proved the plumber would make a

4 Terrance Osborne
Think Destiny doesn't have enough content? Follow Terrance's lead and illustrate your own adventures

5 Ian Richardson
Here's the American Gothic/Martian Gothic mash-up you never asked for





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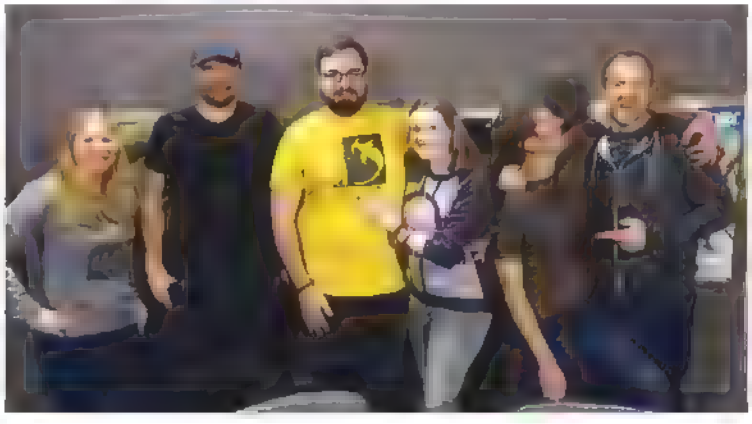
(Left) Readers Ryan McLaughlin and Katie Finnell joined the GI crew for a special episode of Replay, which included a surprise marriage proposal. We'll let you guess who the newly engaged couple is. **(Right)** EA's Brad Hilderbrand and Brian Hayes dropped by this month to show us EA Sports UFC 2, and spotted some familiar classics in the vault.



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THE NEW DIRE

NOTABLES

- top ten helicopter fights
- [illegible] returns to hell
- afterwords: the witness
- massive: blade & soul
- overheard at dice
- opinion: the virtues of going into a game blind

CTION OF FINAL FANTASY

Meet the two men updating the franchise for a new generation of gamers

by Kimberley Wallace

For decades, Final Fantasy reigned supreme as the primary pillar of the RPG genre. With every console since the NES, it innovated and set new standards for the genre, from the cinematics of Final Fantasy VII to the fully voiced cutscenes of Final Fantasy X. However, within the last decade, the franchise has started to fall from grace.

Final Fantasy XIII was divisive, and was worse off for being drawn out over a lackluster trilogy. Final Fantasy XIV, an MMORPG, was such a disaster that the game had to be essentially remade and relaunched as A Realm Reborn. Seven years after it had been announced, the long-awaited Final Fantasy Versus XIII morphed into Final Fantasy XV. Fans lost trust, and Square's name no longer held the same weight as it once did. In the meantime, Western RPGs, such as Mass Effect, The Elder Scrolls, and The Witcher were innovating the genre in unique ways while the Japanese market stagnated.

All eyes are on Square Enix's next move to see if Final Fantasy will once again be an RPG powerhouse. Two men in particular have been tasked with reviving the franchise for a new generation of gamers: Hajime Tabata and Naoki Yoshida. Tabata is directing Final Fantasy XV, and Yoshida continues to head up Final Fantasy XIV after his successful revamp with A Realm Reborn.

After visiting Square Enix's offices in Tokyo, it became even clearer how these different personalities are driving the brand forward.

Naoki Yoshida

THE REVOLUTIONIZER

Long before Naoki Yoshida even enters the room, I hear heavy footfalls from his combat boots and the jangling of his metal jewelry. From his chains to all-black attire, Yoshida has his own style. In many ways, Yoshida has already proved himself, with fans calling him the man who saved Final Fantasy XIV, but he has the task of keeping the MMORPG afloat and entertaining for years to come.

Yoshida is matter-of-fact and doesn't skirt around the issues. This was evident when he went on stage at the 2014 Game Developers Conference and candidly spoke about the failure of Final Fantasy XIV's first launch. He admitted to all its faults, citing a server that would go down up to 400 times per day, a lack of content and bare-bones story, and the team spending more resources on graphics than the gameplay.

It was an eye-opening talk, where Yoshida said Square tapped him to fix the mess. He knew his only option was to rebuild the game entirely. Enter A Realm Reborn, which holds a Metacritic score of an 86 on PS4 and 83 on PC, a far cry from the initial launch score of 49. The recent first expansion, Heavensward, came out to much success, enabling the game to maintain a subscription-based model, something most MMOs outside of World of Warcraft can't sustain.

When I bring up the project, Yoshida flat-out refers to it as a failure. He believes the only way for Square Enix to come back from Final Fantasy XIV's disastrous first impression is to be up front. "It's easy to look away from your mistakes, but then you're bound to repeat them if you don't address them," he says.

Yoshida's solution to Final Fantasy XIV was to "make it feel like a Final Fantasy game." He addressed this in numerous ways to various callbacks such as moogles, chocobos, and jobs like the black and white mage. "I wanted to make a giant Final Fantasy theme park, and that means bringing anything in from the series and having something for all fans, all generations of the series," he says.

One of the things Yoshida is known for is interacting with the players and making sure their voices are heard. While he admits he can't put everything they ask for in the game, he's made it a point to be open with the fans since he took over. This open approach has been a different tactic than the Square Enix of the past. The company had a reputation for not being communicative with its fans, but Yoshida thinks it's essential and has been happy with the results. "I like to look at it as playing catch with a player and be in communication that way," he says. "They give us ideas and we tell them why we can implement them and why we can't."

To keep up with the changing times, Yoshida has spent his time thinking of ways to make an MMORPG for this generation of gamers, who don't have a lot of time on their hands. He says the slow grinds of EverQuest and Ultima aren't feasible in this landscape. "One of the best things about our game is that even if you're a very busy person you can play this game and be rewarded for it," he says.

If all goes according to plan, Square Enix and Yoshida will be involved with Final Fantasy XIV for the long haul. His plans are simple: have frequent updates, stable servers, and copious content. "I've played a lot of MMOs, and I look at it as if an MMO can last a decade then it's a success, so that's our current goal that we can get it to 10 years," Yoshida says. "Saying we want to have this game out for 10 years is easy, but creating a fan base that will stick with the game for 10 years and having a game system that will support the game for 10 years, that's part of our plan – having something that will be viable in 10 years' time. So, we've already started working on the next expansion."

PKed: Naoki Yoshida's First Venture Into Ultima

Naoki Yoshida is an honest guy who isn't afraid to poke fun at himself. When asked about his first ventures into MMORPGs, he was quick to bring up Ultima Online. "It shocked me just like the first time I played Super Mario Bros. back when I was eight," Yoshida says. In fact, it was in Ultima Online where he chatted in a game for the first time ..with a guy who had repeatedly PKed him.

"The first time I played, I saw this guy come with a red name and thought, 'This is someone in the world coming to play with me,' and then he killed me," he recalls laughing. The inexperienced Yoshida kept clicking revive and getting killed. "After this went on for three times, the guy sent me a message: 'Dude, stop! You shouldn't be doing this. You're a newbie, right? If you keep doing this, your skills are going to go.'"

The other player took pity on Yoshida and gave him tips, but Yoshida was just amazed that he was chatting with someone inside the game and discussing it with them. "And that's when I learned that in an MMORPG anything is possible," Yoshida says. "It is the players that are creating that world, and that for me was very, very exciting."

Even as he's earned much success with A Realm Reborn and Heavensward, Yoshida is modest and realistic about it, saying, "I will also admit that the Final Fantasy IP has a strong fan base that will willingly pay money for quality content, so if we create that quality content we have this fan base that will support us, and I think that gives us a little advantage over other MMOs."

While Yoshida is dedicated to Final Fantasy XIV after its cleanup, he also hopes he can bring Japanese game development back on top. His plan? It all goes back to his original philosophy when openly admitting Final Fantasy XIV's shortcomings. "Japan was once great when it came to games, but the West has now caught up and distanced themselves from Japan," he says. "And to bring Japan back up to that level where the West is now it's about finding out what you can do better by looking at those mistakes and learning from those mistakes. As Japanese game makers, we have our pride as well. We don't like it that the West is [ahead]."

THE BIG THINKER

If Hajime Tabata is feeling the weight of having the next big entry in the Final Fantasy franchise on his shoulders, he doesn't show it. When we meet, Tabata is all smiles and wearing a collared shirt – a more straight-laced dresser than his cohort, Naoki Yoshida. While the two are different, they both are in similar positions. Tabata could be the next savior of the series, filling a similar role to when Yoshida stepped in to rescue Final Fantasy XIV.

Tabata is collected, but he also takes his responsibility of making Final Fantasy XV seriously. He took over the project from Tetsuya Nomura just a few years ago, and since then has been doing everything in his power to give fans updates on the project, from Active Time Reports to releasing the Episode Duscae demo, and even patching it with an update based on fan feedback. His project has a long development history, one that has caused many skeptics. While it's only been about three years since the reveal that Final Fantasy Versus XIII is now Final Fantasy XV, gamers have essentially been awaiting for this entry for close to a decade now, and since then the fans have grown up as well.

"We can't assume that everyone is expecting or desiring Final Fantasy," he says. "This is the current state of Final Fantasy, and we need to bring all our efforts together in order to communicate what Final Fantasy is about and the good aspects about it."

That doesn't mean that this title won't involve its history and have influence from the classics, but Tabata says his team couldn't just focus on that. They needed to band together to deliver "a new type of experience and advance the series forward." Expectations are high as the series has a reputation for making an impression on what can be done with the tech each generation. With the Western market upping the ante with RPGs like The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt and Fallout 4, Tabata knows the task before him is difficult and he's tried to adjust his staff's thinking to ensure they're up for the challenge.

Hajime Tabata

In the past, the series could get away with focusing more on mastering its technical prowess than progressing in other areas, but that won't work anymore. "We are no longer the only triple-A RPG out there, and ever since the PS2 and onward, a lot of the Western [developers] have gained prominence both in size and in terms of technological progress," he says.

He knew he had to be communicative with the consumers about the state of the Final Fantasy XV, but he also realized he had to align expectations for his own staff. "A lot of the staff on the Final Fantasy development team have been with the franchise a long time," he says. "They have this sense that they're special because they're developing a Final Fantasy title and whatever they create will be well received. That kind of mindset had been ingrained in them for a very long time, and so we had to start by resetting everything to create something that would appeal to the current generation."

A lot has happened in the years since Final Fantasy XIII debuted. Most notably, the scope of games and this generation's trend toward open-world adventures. One of the big things he wanted for Final Fantasy XV was to make it open world. In the current landscape, Tabata doesn't think you can compete with the top RPG makers without one. "We felt it was very important to deliver an open-world type of environment, so the development team decided to go in that direction and really commit to it," he says. "To push this title out globally, it was essential to have an open world."

Previously, Tabata worked on Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII and Final Fantasy Type-0. Both of these titles are noted for their more poignant moments, such as Crisis Core's ending sequence, where you must accept Zack's fate. An emotional connection to the game is integral to Tabata's design style. "I like to create games that are in sync with real life and reality to a degree...something that drives your emotions that you can really feel," he says.

This is something Tabata has been adamant about crafting into Final Fantasy XV. According to him, much of the game is focused on the human drama of the main character, Noctis. "The player is with the character through and through and sees the growth of the main character," Tabata says. He uses an example of seeing him fish for the first time and then watching him grow up to love fishing. He also says to expect flashback sequences to give you a better idea of how Noctis became the person he is. "A lot of [previous] titles focused on one time in adulthood, and in this title you'll understand his childhood and growth from a boy into a man," Tabata says.

He hopes this helps the player form a connection with Noctis, which plays into one of his biggest goals for the game. "I want to create a very emotional ending to the game and want to make as many people cry as possible," he says. "You're spending so many hours playing the game, so when I finish a game and it ends on a sour note and it doesn't move me, it gets me disappointed. At least make me cry or give me some emotion! I want to give a moving ending for the consumers who invest so much time."

His other goal is a bit more ambitious. Tabata recalls the impact Final Fantasy VII made on the industry, and says his objective for this team is to create a similar reaction when Final Fantasy XV releases. "There are some team members that were here for VII," he explains. "They're taking on the challenge of trying to exceed that title once more, which is a great motivator for them. VII sets a very high goal for us, but it serves as a good goal. It brought in new audiences, sales, and more."

An Unpredictable Road Trip

Time will tell if both Tabata and Yoshida reach their larger goals, but it's clear both are thinking realistically about the state of the RPG genre and their company. Everybody loves a comeback story and seeing Final Fantasy bring the innovation, awe, and confidence it once did would be refreshing. But as we've seen, this generation doesn't come with any promises for any developer. Expectations are constantly rising and new bars are continually being set.

Getting Into Final Fantasy

Both Hajime Tabata and Naoki Yoshida fell in love with games with a little help from our favorite red plumber in Super Mario Bros., but they also recall fondly their admiration for Final Fantasy and have their favorites for different reasons.

Yoshida has two favorites. Based purely on gameplay systems, he's a big fan of Final Fantasy III, but he also loves Final Fantasy VII for its story. "When you look at earlier Final Fantasy games, you think of the ATB system and the job system. Final Fantasy III was the first to have all of those in a complete form, and that's why I look at it as a perfect system," he says. "And with Final Fantasy VII, it being one of the first 3D RPGs, as well as the amount of content and type of content, it felt like an MMO, all of the things you could do in the game. I know Final Fantasy VII inspired a lot of people in the West."

Tabata talks fondly of his time with the first and second entries, remembering when the title screen hits after the first boss in the original Final Fantasy and how the second game opened with a boss battle that impressed him, making him feel he was a part of an action movie. However, Final Fantasy VI also remains at the top of his list, "For VI felt like they delivered a really unique story and they were doing something challenging and new and being very confident with showing it to the world." He came to appreciate Final Fantasy VII even more because he was a developer at the time and realized how much the game was helping push the genre forward.

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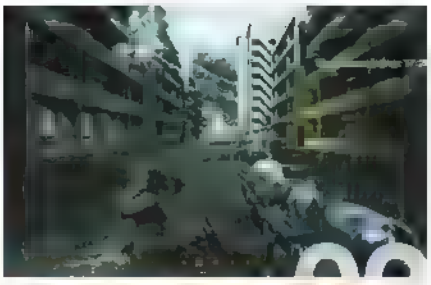
top ten

Helicopter Fights

Metal Gear Solid

The Hind D in Metal Gear Solid is framed as a powerful foe early in the game. Taking out the bird and its pilot, Liquid Snake, from a snowy rooftop with a rocket launcher is an empowering and important moment in the continuous brother vs. brother war



Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare

"All Ghillied Up" may be the most memorable level in all of Call of Duty. The flashback scenario contains a number of fantastic moments, but the near-death battle with a helicopter that almost takes out your partner stands out.

X-Men Origins: Wolverine

Wolverine fights many helicopters in Origins, and each encounter is memorable. He leaps helicopter to helicopter and rips them out of the sky with his claws, or grabs the pilot and shoves their head into the spinning blades.

Half-Life 2

We've lost count of the number of rockets we've fired at helicopters through the years. It's the go-to method when fighting choppers, but Half-Life 2 remains memorable thanks to a targeting system requiring you to expose yourself to get the shot.

Uncharted 2: Among Thieves

Nathan Drake's vacation to South Asia was a disaster. He doesn't so much fight a helicopter in Nepal as much as he endures a city-wide chase against an enemy that takes full advantage of Nathan Drake's greatest enemy: Sure-footing.

Resident Evil 3: Nemesis

Monsters and grotesque versions of unpleasant animals are the typical enemy in Resident Evil, which is why a helicopter fight feels unconventional. It's a quick fight, but one that stands out for eschewing expectations.

Twisted Metal: Black

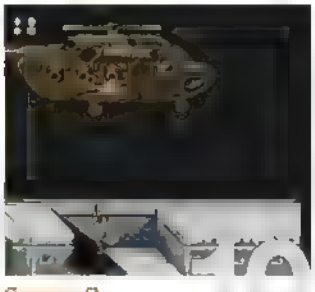
As the saying goes, never bring a helicopter to a car fight. Twisted Metal: Black's final battle is different than the rest of the fights, and it's empowering to take out a flying vehicle with one that can't leave the ground

Prototype 2

Prototype 2 antihero James Heller is a powerful man that hates helicopters. By the end of the game, it seems he's made it his personal mission to tear every single one out of the sky in a lavish, enjoyable display.

Bionic Commando

For a game renowned for its challenge, it's surprising that taking out the antagonist, Master-D, requires only one well-aimed shot on the cockpit of a gigantic helicopter. It's a tough shot, though, and one few reached.

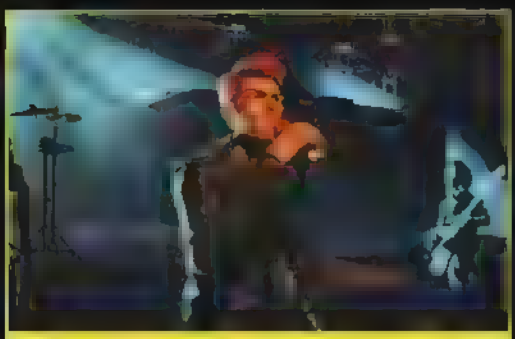


Super C

Contra is all about fighting aliens and alien technology, so you would think a fight against a plain old helicopter would be dull. Thankfully, that's not the case, as the whirlybird down-cars a consistent stream of soldiers at you.

The Good

DESTINY fans will not only be getting a "large, new expansion" for the title in 2016, but publisher Activision and developer Bungie are also promising a sequel to the massively multiplayer online shooter in 2017.



The Bad

MUSIC GAMES may have played their last encore. Both Guitar Hero Live and Rock Band 4 have not sold well, with Activision and Rock Band peripheral-maker Mad Catz reporting less-than-expected earnings from the games. Mad Catz has been hit particularly hard by the disappointing results, reporting $4.36 million in losses for the fiscal year and the layoff of 37 percent of its staff.

The Ugly

QUANTUM BREAK will come out on PC the same day as its Xbox One version on April 5 – making some Xbox One owners angry that the game won't enjoy even a modest exclusivity period on the home console.

Quotable

"...We've decided that there will not be a new Assassin's Creed game in 2016. Since the release of Assassin's Creed Unity, we've learned a lot based on your feedback. We've also updated our development processes and recommitted to making Assassin's Creed a premier open-world franchise."

– A post on the official Ubisoft blog about what's next for the series

Romero Returns To Hell

With a new first-person shooter on the horizon, legendary designer John Romero tests the waters by releasing a brand-new level for the original Doom.

by Jeff Marchiafava

Few individuals were more instrumental to the creation of the first-person shooter genre than John Romero. As one of the co-founders of id Software, Romero designed seven of the eight maps included in Doom's Episode 1, the widely distributed shareware version of the game that helped fuel its massive popularity. The only Episode 1 level Romero didn't have a hand in creating was the final boss map, known as E1M8 (Episode 1, Map 8) by Doom's still-thriving mod community. Now after more than two decades since Doom's original release, Romero has crafted his own ending to the episode that started it all.

Romero surprised fans by simultaneously announcing the map via Twitter and releasing it for free. Not only did creating the level allow Romero to brush up on his level design skills, it was also an opportunity to deliver a finale more in line with his original vision for Doom's first episode. "If I was making E1M8 back then, I would have made a level that was much bigger," Romero says. "It would have been bigger than E1M7, because I wanted the episode to culminate in this big, epic level."

Entitled Tech Gone Bad, Romero's new level has Doomguy investigating a high-tech laboratory to find the location of the demon-spewing portal and shut it down. In addition to the sprawling test site, players explore massive outdoor areas, a maze-like series of sewers, and two adjoining installations. True to Doom's classic formula, Romero loaded the map with secrets areas and hidden power-ups, and higher difficulty levels drastically ratchet up the enemy count. The result is a level that feels novel, but not necessarily new – an important characteristic for Romero.

"I wanted to stay as close to the original style as possible," Romero says. "And I also wanted to call back to parts of the [previous] levels that players have already gone through. So they remember – not only because it's today, but if it was back in 1993 when the game came out – it would be like, 'Oh, I remember when this happened five levels ago.'"

Romero didn't stop with homages to the classic levels, he also adhered to the same the limitations to make Tech Gone Bad as authentic as possible. "I wanted [Tech Gone Bad] to fit as if I made it back then. So if I'd made it in 1993, I needed to restrict myself to the shareware textures only, and not use

jumping, not use mouse-look. ."

A number of modern enhancements have been made to Doom's source engine in the last 23 years, but Romero only allowed himself one concession. "All of the [modern Doom ports] remove limitations on what's called visplanes – visible planes in your view," Romero says. "So I figured the only thing I will depend on is that you're using a limit-removing source port, which means I can put more lines in the view and make it look cooler."

Romero also adhered to the same personal design tenets he employed in '93. "In the original Episode 1, usually in every level I introduced something new for the player to learn or do," Romero says. "So I needed something new that the player could do in this level, and I wanted to do something that I hadn't done even in Doom II or Ultimate Doom."

For Tech Gone Bad, Romero created a winding corridor that crosses back above another explorable area, something the Doom engine isn't technically capable of. So how did he pull it off? The answer lies in creative use of a technique known as the "Doom jump."

Jumping wasn't possible in the original Doom, but if players were quick, they could sprint across small gaps between platforms. "I used those [Doom jump] gaps to create a 3D area, where you're going underneath an area that you'll eventually run across later," Romero says. Romero made liberal use of Doom jumps in the outdoor areas of the map as well, requiring the player to dance over pools of acid while dodging fireballs from an army of angry Imps.

Tech Gone Bad still culminates in a final battle against two Barons of Hell, affectionately referred to as the "bruiser brothers" by fans. However, players should expect a serious challenge. "I made [Tech Gone Bad] surprisingly more difficult than E1M7, just because today's players are much better, and I think that helps make the level really fun," Romero says. "After 20 years, it's as hard as it's really going to get, I think."

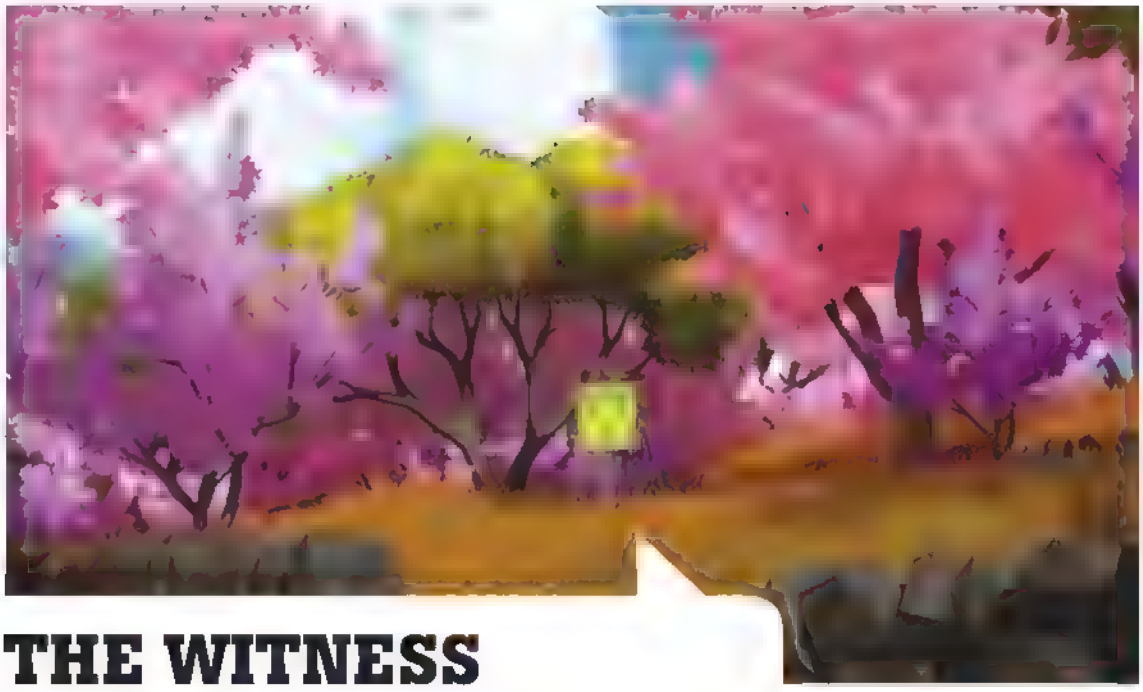
As exciting as it is to play a new Doom level from one of the original creators, fans may be more interested in Romero's reason for creating it in the first place. "I'm going to be making a new shooter pretty soon," Romero says, "and I'm going to be doing a lot of level design in it, so I wanted to warm up."

So what made Romero want to create a new shooter after all these years? "Basically, I decided to come back because I think I have a good idea," Romero says, laughing. Romero wouldn't divulge what that golden idea is, but he did promise an announcement in the near future, so fans hopefully shouldn't have to wait long to find out more. In the meantime, having a new Doom level from one of the forefathers of the FPS genre to keep us busy is a pretty good deal. \

ROMERO ON THE NEW DOOM

During our interview, we asked what John Romero thinks of id Software's upcoming Doom reboot. So far, the ex-co-founder of the company likes what he sees. "I'm really excited to play it," Romero says. "I think what they've done with SnapMap is really innovative and is going to bring a lot more people into the game...the fact that you can take someone's map and modify it to make it even better but they still retain the original credits is incredible."

Considering Romero's recent activities, his endorsement of SnapMap should come as no surprise. "I think that's one of the powerful parts of Doom coming out again, is supporting people that want to make their own stuff in the game – but they get to do it in such an easy way...and it's easily shareable with other people. So I think [id is] doing something that's probably more important than the game itself."



THE WITNESS

An intricate and challenging puzzle game, The Witness is the new title from Braid creator Jonathan Blow and his team at Thekla Inc. The project began its development in 2008, and now that gamers are finally playing it, we chatted with Blow about the process of creating this elegant and intriguing experience. *by Joe Juba*

In 2014, reports indicated that The Witness was nearing the finish line. Were there any big changes that pushed the release to 2016?
Nothing really changed. "Finish line" is relative, right? I didn't think it would be as long as it has been; I was thinking, "Oh, maybe six or eight months, we'll have this wrapped up." But everyone has a different interpretation. Basically, that was a time when all of the major components of the gameplay were finalized. It just maybe needed to go faster, or certain objects needed to feel better. Because it's such a big game, this finishing took a long time. If it comes down to working on it three more months or having something be kinda crappy, I'd rather work on it three more months. There was no dramatic setback or anything.

Are the puzzles able to enforce their own rule, or did you need to manually program all possible solutions?
All other things being equal, it is best if the program knows how to judge a puzzle, because it's less error-prone. If I have to put in the solution, then I might make a mistake, especially when there are so many possible solutions that I might not see some of them. For most of the puzzle types, the program knows how to verify that a solution is correct, so I don't actually need to foresee all correct solutions... But then there's stuff in the game that the computer doesn't really know about, and those solutions are all put in by hand – like when shadows are falling on an object in a certain way. That's just not something the computer knows how to analyze.

So, if someone thinks they have a correct answer that isn't being recognized properly, they're wrong?
They're probably wrong. In fact, every single one of those that anyone has sent me is wrong.

Do any of the puzzle themes stand out as being particularly difficult to design?
The thing that was hardest to design well is the cylinder puzzles. Because, you can wrap a puzzle around a cylinder, and that's fine, you automatically have a human factor now, since you can't see the whole puzzle. But if it ends up being a puzzle that you could solve just as well on a flat board, then why is it on the cylinder? It's not interesting... So, all of the cylinder puzzles are made in such a way that either the connectivity of the space matters, or the fact that your line has to go all the way around matters.

Those cylinder puzzles defy sharing solutions through screenshots. Was that a reason for them being so near the end of the game?
It was more just about building up to interesting ideas. That whole end-game shaft area is about taking the ideas from earlier in the game and putting them together in a way that involves messing around with the presentation. The medium between you and the puzzle. Though, there is one of those cylinder puzzles very early in the game, also. Even though it's right there, we sort of build the scene so that people tend to overlook it and go right past it.

Most of the design seems deliberate and purposeful, which makes certain things (like the discarded triangle panels) conspicuous. Does every panel in the game do something?
It depends on what you mean by "do something." The triangle panels, for example, definitely do something, because otherwise there would be no way for you learn what the more complex triangle panels mean. Do they do something in terms of opening a door somewhere? No, they don't... They do get checked off on the lake in middle of the island, so another thing they do is make you feel good about completing the lake. Usually things have another purpose or bearing on something else.

Many players need to use pencils and paper to help work through puzzles. Was that something you were consciously trying to bring to the experience?
I wouldn't say that I was deliberately designing for pencil and paper as an agenda, but I would say that I was definitely designing counter to the trend of the last decade or more of just making games really easy and making puzzles

not be real puzzles. Triple-A companies especially do all this playtesting, and anytime someone gets stuck on something or gives negative feedback, they change that thing. The thing about hard puzzles is people are going to get stuck on those, and they're going to say, "I didn't like this." It's just being willing to say, "No, this going to be in the game." Maybe if they're super-hard, they're optional. You have to be willing to have that stuff in the game.

The audio recordings that address the story directly are hidden in an optional end-game area. Why not let players uncover them during a normal playthrough?
It all came down to how big I wanted the story to be in the ultimate experience. In early concepts of the game, I thought that story was going to be a very large part. But then as development went on and I refined the game, I kept revisiting the story and being very unhappy with the way my concept of the story would play out. Eventually I decided that the story should be pretty small, in terms of how much of the experience it makes up... I also don't like giving story as a reward for ongoing play; I felt like I wanted to make a game that had confidence, that people really wanted to play the actual game part of the game, that doesn't need to coax people through by giving them story bits.

How did you select the videos for the Windmill theater?
It was really about knowing what kinds of ideas that I wanted in the game, and the kind of presentation. All of those videos are, in one way or another, people talking about ideas about how to see the world. They are well-thought-out viewpoints from people whose life work is that. But the other thing about them is that they're all different viewpoints. I'm not trying to put a bunch of things together to make a unified point or convince the player that these people are saying different flavors of the same thing. They're saying different flavors of different things, and that ties into what the game is about at some level.

Some of the puzzles are inaccessible to some players – especially those who have trouble hearing or seeing colors. Was this a consideration during development?
We were very aware of that during development. I actually spent a lot of design time trying to design puzzles that only colorblind players could solve, but I didn't succeed at that. But the way that I designed for accessibility is to just be aware that some people aren't going to be able to do all of the puzzles, and then make it possible to complete the game without those puzzles. There are a few specific times where that happens. One very obvious example is the sound-based puzzles; you're just not going get one of the lasers if you can't hear... It's a similar thing with the color-blindness, there's basically one laser that requires color sense. But the surprising thing is that most color-blind people don't seem to have a problem in that area... But it is still a problem for some people, because there are different kinds of color-blindness and magnitudes. There are only a couple areas of the game that are mandatory. To get the ending, you only need seven lasers... but there is a secret area that does require every laser. You know what? If people want to get there, and they have to look stuff up on the Internet to get there, that's fine. I'm totally cool with that.

What did you think of the response to your tweet about the pee bottle?
It was bewildering! Here I was with a prop we used in filming – it was a bottle of water with some food coloring in it – and I was about to dump it out, and I was like, "I should get a picture of this before I dump it out." I already had done one about a week before saying, "Here's something I made in order to help finish The Witness," and it was glasses with tape on them and holes in the tape... So, I was like, "I know what to do with this bottle, I'll tweet another one of those." But I expected people to know that it was a joke, and it would be mildly funny at best. For some reason, people didn't know if it was a joke, and a lot of people assumed it wasn't. I saw indie developers going off about quality of life in response to that. Like, full-on 10- or 15-tweet barrages about how this isn't a healthy way to develop games. I've been a human male for 40-something years now; it doesn't take very long to get up for a second and go to the bathroom. It just doesn't. The idea that it would be plausible that someone would feel like they didn't have time to do that is fundamentally not credible. I don't know. It was very strange.

You've said that The Witness has been successful enough to fund another project of similar depth. How long until you start thinking about what's next?
Well, I've started thinking about it already. However, there's a difference between thinking about it and designing a thing for real. In terms of actually sitting down and starting to work on the game in a real way, that probably will not happen for a couple of months. There's a lot to do right now, and I need a little bit of a vacation.

The Strategy Guide Machine

Name:
David S. J. Hodgson

Twitter:
@DavidSJHodgson

Occupation:
Author

Location:
Los Angeles (by way of Manchester, England)

Even if you don't recognize his name, you've probably benefitted from the work of David S. J. Hodgson. The prolific author has been writing strategy guides since 1995, and his recent work includes Prima's expansive official guides for Fallout 4 and The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt. We talked to Hodgson about his unique approach to games and the effort it takes to unearth every detail and secret.

interview by Joe Juba

You've been doing this for a long time. How many guides have you written?
I think my total hit 100 exactly with Fallout 4. That includes Game of the Year editions, too.

You have written guides for massive RPGs, including The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim. What kind of effort is required for a project of that size?
The Skyrim Game of the Year guide is 1,120 pages, 780,000 words, and over 4,000 screenshots. All but one of those screenshots I took myself, and the other one was the guy from Bethesda who wanted his character's portrait in the book. You take video of all of the quests, and you do that multiple times, to get all of the variations and multiple paths. Then you move on to doing the atlas, so you visit every location in the game ...If you totaled up all the hours, we (a co-worker and I) put in over 6,000 hours – and that wasn't even writing the guide! That was just the game.

Do you get cheat codes, or do you have to play normally?
I have to use god mode and cheats, but I always do my first playthrough without them, because it affects the strategy. For example, I play The Witcher 3 like regular people would. Then I spawn a quest and go through it like a QA department would. Then I play by getting a floating camera and going over all of the map, and so forth.

You start writing when the game is still in development. Are you ever able to influence the content?
You need to go in and leave a light footprint; the company is already in the crunch time of all crunch times. But sometimes companies do something really fun and cool for you. For example, in The Witcher 3, the guy in Novigrad's books and scrolls store is called Marcus T.K. Hodgson. So I have my first video game character named after me!

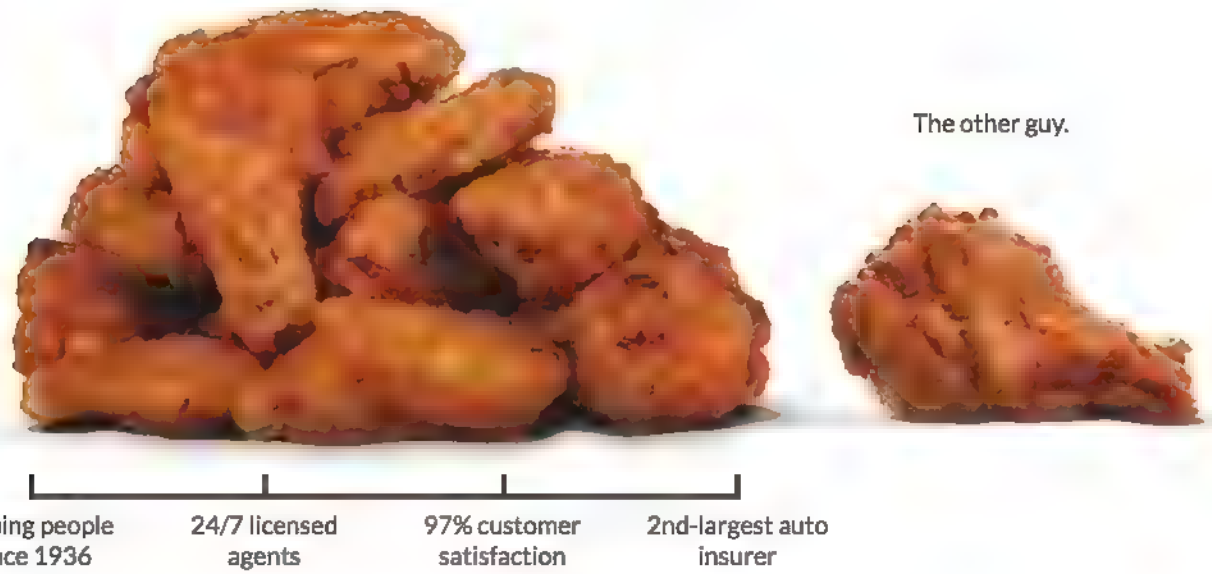
What's your favorite game genre to write guides for?
I enjoy writing travel guides to places that don't exist... the big role-playing games that are single-player. Witcher 3, Skyrim, Fallout. Even Watch Dogs – something like that with a large map that I can really sink my teeth into.

Most guides are sold based on the game on the cover rather than the author. Have you encountered fans that seek out your work specifically?
Most people don't think of me as a "real" author, and I'm completely fine with that. I don't consider myself to be of the caliber of a proper author. But I do have a small collection of people that know my guides and enjoy them. They know, going in, that they're likely to get a guide that's as thorough as human beings can do it within the confines of the process.

What types of games do you play in your free time?
I haven't played a game for fun in over a decade. I mean, I find my job fun, but I devote all of my gaming time to what I'm doing the guide for. Otherwise, there wouldn't be enough time to finish the guide. Anybody who does a strategy guide probably has a part of their brain that isn't functioning properly, and has a work/life balance issue. [laughs] It's a dream job. I love it, and I'm incredibly lucky to have it. But I also realize that it's a job you need to have a complete passion for, or else it will chew you up and spit you out.

If not games, do you keep yourself sane with other hobbies?
I'd have keeled over and died if I didn't have a dog I could take out for walks, because it's such a sedentary lifestyle. But I also started to collect succulents – different types of aloe and cacti. I now have a Pokémon-style obsession with collecting every variety. I grow and tend to the succulent garden, which I've found to be fantastic, because it thrives on neglect. If I were growing geraniums, I'd have some problems.

GEICO



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Blade & Soul

Carried by combat

NCSOFT West's bid to bring the winning Korean formula to North American players is an exciting one, as Blade & Soul features some of the best combat I've ever experienced in an MMORPG. While Eastern MMORPGs have long dealt with a reputation of being grindy, pay-to-win endeavors over on Western shores, Blade & Soul's over-the-top martial-arts fantasy dispels that notion by serving up exciting gameplay that doesn't get dull, monster after monster, dungeon after dungeon. Despite plenty of generic quests and unexciting monsters to beat on, the combat systems propel Blade & Soul to greatness.

by Daniel Tack

While the story and tutorial don't do much to bring the player in (a tired, cliché "vengeance for my fallen master tale"), players will get a real sense of what the game is about quickly as they unlock abilities for their class, each of which has their own special flavor and mechanics. Whatever class you choose, skill, timing, and attention count for a lot. My character, a Destroyer, is a tanky frontliner who wields a massive axe – not a wholly novel concept. The originality shines in execution of combat maneuvers; with a customizable set of powerful grabs, launchers, knockdowns, and stuns, my character can walk up to enemies, pummel them to the ground, and pick them up and smash them repeatedly before flinging them through the air to knock into other foes or delivering massive blows that will put the enemy down for good. It's like Street Fighter's Zangief and Soulcalibur's Astaroth had an MMORPG love child.

Each character has a difficulty rating corresponding to how active and responsive you have to be in combat, chaining combos and linking moves, and this system shines in single-player and player-vs-player encounters. It's even more fun when you group up via the cross-server dungeon finder and start integrating your abilities into other characters' combos and knockdowns. You can let the group hammer on a defenseless monster you're lifting, or you can follow up on another character's launcher with your own devastating attack.

This combat system is the absolute gem of Blade & Soul and the reason to play it. Other systems, like crafting, seem barebones and boring compared to other modern MMORPG offerings – you simply click a crafting or gathering button and wait hours and hours for your items to collect or complete, sometimes waiting up to 20 hours for a completion. That said combat kept me loving every encounter, from the lowliest bandit to the most dangerous opponents – other players.

Blade & Soul's leveling process is short compared to some other MMORPGs. Even if you're a solo enthusiast, you'll probably team up casually during "field boss" encounters to get yourself a cool outfit or a pile of powerful soul shards (an analog to armor sets from other games). By placing armor into the soul shard slots instead of clothing, players are free to show off their style in their wardrobe selection instead, as decorative wear has no need to bestow stats. You may be sporting the same weapon through the whole process, but you feed it other equipment to increase its power and change its appearance.

As players look to the end-game, they'll find the same things they've come to expect from other MMORPGs, such as high-end dungeons and raids and daily quests, with the addition of serious, competitive PvP sporting unique rewards for those interested in that element of the game.

Blade & Soul is worth a try based on the combat alone (it's also free-to-play, by the way). If you're one of those folks who is looking for an MMORPG but the combat always feels stale, get ready to be wowed by active counters, parrying, and stimulating battles that feel extremely satisfying.

The Skullgirls Creators Tackle Role-Playing

Switching creative direction can be a big challenge for a developer, as all the tricks and tools learned in one genre might have little bearing on a new style of game. This is the challenge facing Lab Zero Games as it broaches new territory in the RPG/exploration mash-up, **Indivisible**. After playing the publicly available prototype, I spoke with CEO Peter Bartholow to learn how the project has continued to evolve since a nail-biter of a crowdfunding campaign.

"At its core, Indivisible is an RPG – you explore environments, fight monsters, complete quests, recruit new party members, and level up," Bartholow says. "But unlike most RPGs, the exploration component is side-scrolling platforming, and we'll be building on the exploration component with Metroid-like upgrades." Like that classic exploration game, Indivisible tasks you with hunting down hidden upgrades throughout a vast 2D world, but instead of energy tanks, you're seeking weapons and armor for your party members.

Indivisible's setting is one of its most intriguing features. The chief inspiration is Southeast Asian mythology, and many of the beautiful visuals and mystical terminology arise from that source. The unfolding tale eventually takes its lead character everywhere from South America to the Middle East. The story focuses on Ajna, a young woman in search of answers and justice after her town is overwhelmed by local warlords. "Along the way she discovers she has a mysterious power – the ability to fuse with and manifest certain people – and much of her journey shifts to discovering more about herself, in addition to confronting the source of the chaos increasing in the world," Bartholow says.

Lab Zero started work on Indivisible as a pitch to a publisher looking for something akin to Ubisoft's Child of Light. That goal led the team to consider one of their shared favorites. "Valkyrie Profile has a lot in common with fighting games, making it a great fit for our team," Bartholow says. That classic tri-Ace RPG featured an innovative combat system in which character attacks were mapped to the controller's face buttons, allowing for intriguing combo attacks. That same core concept powers Indivisible, but with some significant variations. "As much as we love Valkyrie Profile, it has a time limit and not much room for exploration, so we wanted to open that up a bit more," Bartholow says. Combat in Indivisible is chaotic and challenging, demanding carefully timed defensive maneuvers, observation of enemy attack telegraphs, and constant attention to a meter that powers your super attacks. Each member of your party has a unique skill set, so another challenge is determining groups that combine well.

Your growing party of characters comes along with a strange twist. "As Ajna explores the world, she meets a number of people – incarnations – that for a reason we won't be spoiling today she can absorb into her being," Bartholow explains. "We're thinking that in order to fuse with someone Ajna needs to be on a similar emotional wavelength or empathize with their situation before she can fuse with them. So these fusions might happen in key story moments, or for completing optional side quests." Many incarnations are dedicated party members who join in battle and offer their combat skills. Lab Zero is planning for 27 playable characters. Just to name a few, Kushi is a little girl who commands a flying roc that drops her into combat, Lanshi is a dog who regressed into a lower lifeform upon reincarnation, and Zahra is a musician who can devastate foes with her sad songs.

These new heroes not only add their strength to a fight, but might provide Ajna with a new weapon or ability that can help her better traverse the world. For example, the spear lets her create platforms in spiked walls, and the chain-sickle lets her swing across gaps.

Other incarnations begin to populate Ajna's inner realm – a whole dimension growing inside of her filled with people, buildings, and activities. By pausing in the world to meditate, she can enter her own inner realm to talk to her incarnations, upgrade weapons and armor, and more. "So the Inner Realm provides a lot of the functionality of an RPG town, but without the need to trek back and forth," Bartholow says.

Indivisible is awash in intriguing ideas, but the project is a long way out from release, with a planned launch in early 2018 on PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PC, Mac, and Linux. The depth of mythology, multiple gaming inspirations, breathtaking art, and talented team make this a game I plan to watch closely as it draws nearer to release.

Overheard at D.I.C.E.

Industry luminaries meet for 2014 conference to discuss emerging trends, success stories, and crossover potential between video games and film.

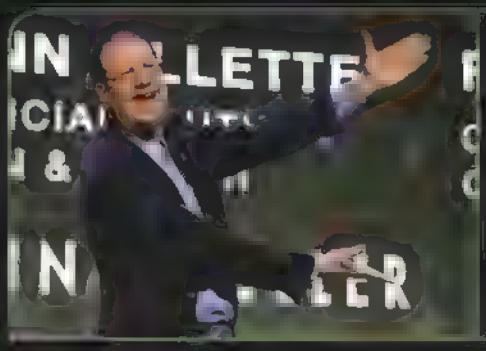
by Matt Barts

"I think Zelda, Mario, and the whole universe of Nintendo characters would be perfect for a *The Lego Movie* type movie. I don't have the rights to it, but I would love to. That would be my holy grail."

– *Vertigo Entertainment president Roy Lee (left)*

"I feel extremely free right now. I am trying to make a big game with a very small team. I am doing exactly what I want to do."

— Metal Gear Solid creator Hideo Kojima on his new partnership with Sony



"If you liked rock 'n' roll in 1971, you have to love video games today."

— magician Penn Jillette

"Like in the cinema, you have beautiful indie games that are subtle, or poetic. It's limitless. It's only limited by the bastards with money."

— filmmaker Guillermo Del Toro

"Mr. Iwata has been gone for some time now, and I think about him almost every day. Mr. Iwata, you were the best of us."

— Nintendo of America president Reggie Fils-Aime

"We are doing three longer-term projects. We'll talk about them in the future. They are different from anything we have done before, while also being a Bethesda-style game."

— Bethesda Game Studios director Todd Howard

"In 1995 we were making Civ II, and people would come around and tell you if you don't capture a user's attention in the first hour of gameplay you're in trouble. These days it's the first three seconds or something like that."

— Big Huge Games founder Brian Reynolds

From Guildmate To Game Director

Jeff "Tigole" Kaplan got his first industry gig thanks to being an EverQuest guildmate of former Blizzard chief creative officer Rob Pardo. His thoughts on game design landed him a job on reigning MMO juggernaut World of Warcraft, and now Kaplan is the game director on one of 2016's most promising upcoming first-person shooters, Overwatch.

How did you get started in the gaming industry?
I got started in the industry almost by accident. I never really thought a career in video games was achievable by someone like me; I always thought you had to be an amazing programmer or a really talented artist to have a career in video games. I was pursuing a career in film, and then writing. I actually got my master's degree in creative writing from New York University. I was trying to get my short stories published and work on a novel, but I was still playing a ton of video games.

Games like Duke Nukem 3D and Half-Life had map editors, and I'd make maps and that sort of thing.

I spent a good part of my 20s trying to get my writing published, and I was failing. In one year, for example, I had 172 rejections from different magazines. I decided to take a break from writing. Since I had all this free time, I got really into EverQuest. I started playing that game very hardcore and just as the fates would have it, my guild leader heard me talking about how I made maps in Half-Life. I thought he was just a fellow gamer interested in seeing what I was doing. It turned out that guild leader was Robert Pardo, who at the time was the lead designer on Warcraft III for Blizzard Entertainment. What I learned later was many of my guild members in EverQuest worked at Blizzard.

The big irony there is that I didn't really know what Blizzard was. I didn't play StarCraft or Warcraft because I was more of an FPS gamer. I played a lot of id games.

They were like, "Hey, you live in L.A., why don't you come down and visit us at Irvine sometime?" Which is only an hour away from where I was living. At the time, World of Warcraft wasn't announced, so it was a secret that they were working on an MMO. They asked me to come down for what I thought was just a series of lunches. Back in those days, video games were a little taboo; people didn't talk about them openly. I enjoyed having a group of friends where we could talk about our latest raid and how we're going to defeat this latest dragon. What I didn't realize at the time was that those guys were interviewing me for a role with World of Warcraft.

Eventually I remember Rob in guild chat saying to me, "Hey, check the job postings on the Blizzard website tomorrow. There's a job and I really think you should apply for it." It was for a quest designer on World of Warcraft. I swear to you the job description was written exactly to my background. "Super passionate about MMOs, has past experience with MMOs, and by the way we're looking for someone with a creative writing degree." I felt they were speaking to me.

What was it like playing EverQuest back then? I remember it being really hardcore. Do you feel like those top guilds were a recruiting ground for the games industry?

I describe what that game did for gaming and me personally as nothing short of magical. I regard EverQuest as one of the greatest games of all time. But you mention how hardcore it was, and I agree with that. Not only was it hardcore, it was very punishing, and you needed a certain level of tolerance to put up with the constant defeat and constant recovery required by the game. It was a very skilled, smaller community, but everybody was very passionate about the game and gaming in general.

This small community really perpetuated and encouraged very deep design discussions about the game. Because of that it's very easy to look back at EQ or different websites or forums and say, "Wow, this person, who is that guy who calls himself Furor? That guy is really smart about playing EverQuest. He has really smart things to say about raiding and the way these mechanics should work." Then you look him up and it's [current WoW creative director] Alex Afrasiabi. There were so many people like that in EverQuest who really displayed their knowledge. In the early days they weren't called blog posts, but guild leaders would post their thoughts about the game and how they thought mechanics should work.

Has your own commenting in that circle shaped your thoughts on passionate feedback?

Yeah, it absolutely has. One of my favorite things is when players plunge the depth of the Internet and they'll pull old quotes that I said and use them against me. I find that very humbling, and it's very important to remember where I was coming from at the time. But for me, writing and being part of a big community was a lot of fun. I had that background in creative writing, so I loved expressing myself in that way. It's given me a real appreciation for community leaders, especially people who are vocal and driving community opinion.

In the early days of World of Warcraft, I bonded with the people running the uber guilds at the time. I would reach out to as many of them as possible and make sure they had my email address. I was able to talk to them through DM tools. I would go in as they were raiding and talk to them, ask if everything was working correctly, are you guys having any issues – really try to open the dialogue with them. I wish that had been done with me when I was a player. I feel like I could have helped make some of the games I played better if there had been an open dialogue with some of the players. We're not just nameless, faceless developers who are ruthlessly trying to make a game so we can move on to the next one. We're really trying to build something great here, and we know that happens with player and developer interaction.

How did you move from making MMOs to a first-person shooter?

That's a great question. As I mentioned, shooters were really my first love when it comes to video games. Doom, Duke Nukem, Quake, and Wolfenstein 3D were some of my biggest inspirations. That was an exciting period of time, because we were starting to see games from the first-person standpoint and start to appreciate 3D worlds, which was a whole new way of looking at video games.

It's something that I always wanted to work on. I had an immense passion for MMOs as well, but one thing that I was never fully in love with in any of the MMOs was the combat itself. I think the combat was really fun, but nothing quite spoke to me like playing Quake III Arena in terms of action combat, like how to really get your heart pumping, that visceral feeling.

I've always been dying to work on a shooter, and then there was a great era of shooters in the 2000's that happened. Call of Duty 4 and Modern Warfare 2 I think were some of the greatest shooters of the present era that were ever made. They were absolutely fantastic games and really inspired me. Team Fortress 2 was just mega in my mind, because I had grown up in that Quake community where I played Team Fortress 1 as a Quake mod. I remember it with great nostalgia, and then I remember when Team Fortress classic came out as part of a Half-Life release and being blown away by how much they had progressed the genre. Team Fortress 2 not only was a juggernaut in terms of class-based team shooters, but I think it transcended game design in general of how many smart decisions were made in terms of making sort of a modern, beautiful, elegant, simple video game.

As we were rolling off of Titan and coming up with ideas that we as a team were super passionate about, we chased our hearts more than anything else. The whole MOBA coming of age had happened with Dota, Dota 2, League of Legends, and Heroes of the Storm. While we didn't want to make a MOBA, we were looking at what is super great about these games that really appeals to people. It's that idea of delivering heroes as characters, and not just giving people classes, but really developing heroes.

Overwatch has been a passion project from day one, but it's unique in the fact that it's a collaborative passion project that's shared by the entire team. I've never been on a team that shared such a unified vision and cared so much about what they're making than Overwatch.

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

2000
Kaplan meets former Blizzard COO Rob Pardo in the legendary Legacy of Steel EverQuest guild

2002
Pardo encourages Kaplan to join Blizzard as an associate quest designer for World of Warcraft

2004
Blizzard ships World of Warcraft, which quickly becomes the most popular MMORPG

2007
Serving as the co-lead, Kaplan ships The Burning Crusade expansion

2008
Now a game director, Kaplan leads the Wrath of the Lich King expansion

2008
Kaplan begins working on Titan full time as lead game designer

2012
Kaplan becomes game director on Titan

2013
Blizzard announces Titan's cancellation

2014
Blizzard announces Overwatch, a new first-person shooter with Kaplan at the helm as game director

by Tim Turi

Stick & Move

Rounding up the fightstick options for Street Fighter V

1 Mad Catz Street Fighter V Arcade FightStick T.E.2+

This is the latest iteration in Mad Catz's popular series. Emblazoned with Ryu's determined visage, this stick is built to last. The precise joystick clicks reliably on your first quarter-circle motion or your 3,000th. The face offers more room to rest your palm than any other design on offer. The T.E.2+ is also comfortable and helps when you're timing fierce finger taps on the glossy buttons.

It also features a hinged design that lets you open the fightstick for access to a storage department for your detachable ProCable. This T.E.2+ works on both PS3 and PS4, and features a touchpad and L3/R3 buttons for full controller functionality. If you're seeking a balance of durability, precision, comfort, and portability, look no further than the T.E.2+.

SUPERB

$299.99 | *madcatz.com*

2 Hori Real Arcade Pro 4 Kai

This mid-sized Hori fightstick boasts the reliable core features of the other sticks in this roundup, with the added benefit of PC compatibility alongside PS3 and PS4. Unfortunately, the options button is dangerously close to the primary buttons, making it easy for players to accidentally pause the action in the heat of battle. The form factor – with its utilitarian button layout and protruding edges – leaves something to be desired. The matte Hayabusa buttons are a muted contrast to most fightsticks' glossy hard-candy buttons, but their rapid throw satisfies. The Pro 4 Kai is great for world warriors planning local battles across all platforms.

VERY GOOD

$149.99 | *horiusa.com*

3 Mad Catz Street Fighter V Arcade FightStick T.E.S+

Fans of last generation's Tournament Edition FightSticks by Mad Catz will feel right at home with this PS3/PS4 version. The control panel has been shifted to the middle of the stick, complete with the new PS4 touchpad. The wired cable can still be tucked away in a convenient nook. A worthy choice for any fighter.

VERY GOOD

$199.99 | *madcatz.com*

4 Hori Fighting Commander 4

The Commander 4 is a great option for PS3 and PS4 users who prefer a pad. The sensitivity of its retro-inspired d-pad can be adjusted to your preference. The asymmetrical design gives your right thumb freedom to fly across the six face buttons. The precision of the Commander 4's d-pad and smart form factor sets it apart.

AVERAGE

$44.99 | *horiusa.com*

5 Mad Catz Street Fighter V Arcade FightStick Alpha

The Alpha's adorably diminutive profile, portability, and affordability don't make up for its poor performance. The Alpha, compatible with both PS3 and PS4, is missing the touchpad and L1/L2 buttons. Its small size makes it awkward to use while in your lap, and its lightweight nature means it wobbles everywhere during furious combos. The Alpha's joystick and springy, chintzy buttons are also obnoxiously loud, which will only draw attention to your embarrassment. If carting a fightstick around with you everywhere is a priority, you deserve better hardware.

PAINFUL

$79.99 | *madcatz.com*

CREED

The sequel to 2006's *Rocky Balboa* tells the tale of former boxing champ, Rocky (Sylvester Stallone), training Adonis Johnson (Michael B. Jordan), the son of his former rival Apollo Creed. Make sure to wear your workout clothes while watching, because you'll feel inspired to hit the gym as the credits roll.

$35.99
warnerbros.com/creed

CRYPT OF THE NECRODANCER – FREESTYLE RETRO

Jake Kaufman, the virtuosic composer behind the high-energy, old-school Shovel Knight tunes, is back at it with an arranged cover album of Danny Baranowsky's (Super Meat Boy) Crypt of the NecroDancer soundtrack. The already dancy melodies are infused with a delightful layer of synth grit.

Name Your Price
virt.bandcamp.com

STREET FIGHTER X G.I. JOE #1

Capcom and Hasbro's legendary series are prone to crossover madness, and this new IDW series mashes the disparate universes together. Street Fighter vets like Ryu and Chun-Li face off against G.I. Joe soldiers such as Snake Eyes and Duke in a secret tournament. Will the "Real American Heroes" rise up?

$4.99
idwpublishing.com

The Virtues Of Going Into A Game Blind

by Andrew Reiner, Executive Editor

Gone Home is a fascinating game, but I don't want to tell you anything about it. I just want you to play it, experience it, and discover what it is on your own.

This is the advice I was given from my coworkers when asked if Gone Home was worth my time. The game seemingly came out of nowhere, and before I knew it, everyone was gushing about it. The praise was ambiguous though, and any probing I did into their admiration of the title was met with silence and smiles. I was told to stop asking questions for fear of having the entire game ruined for me. I was dumbfounded by this response.

Common sense dictates that we learn as much as we can about a game, movie, or book before committing time to it. I want to know what I'm getting into, but more and more I'm being told that part of what makes an experience fun is not knowing anything about it.

For Gone Home specifically, this level of secrecy extended to a coworker saying they wouldn't tell me what genre it fell into. That obviously piqued my interest. My mind was swimming with ideas of what it could be. I convinced myself it would be similar to BioShock in some capacity, given the talent behind it. Mock me if you will, but I thought Gone Home would deliver combat and a crazy narrative twist along the way. That's how little I knew about it.

I booted Gone Home up that night, knowing only that it was a first-person experience that begins in a house. The opening moments hinted at horror, and I bought into it hook, line, and sinker. I was certain the journey ahead would be unnerving and suspenseful. I played the entire game on the edge of my seat, waiting for jump scares, or some ghostly being to complicate my search for answers. Nothing like that happened. I loved every second of it.

A day later, I found myself questioning why I enjoyed it so much, and realized most of the fun was tied to the discovery aspect of not knowing what I was getting into.

I immediately wanted another game like it, and the industry didn't disappoint in delivering more experiences with similar hooks. If you love these types of games, a deluge of them is on the market. Soma, Her Story, The Stanley Parable, Everybody's Gone to the Rapture, Undertale, and Life is Strange all fit the billing. Two of the most interesting games of the year so far, Firewatch and Oxenfree, were recommended to me with the caveat of going into them as blind as possible.

For a game like Firewatch, which carries the dreadfully boring billing of a "mystery set in the Wyoming wilderness," I've had to hold back from diving into forums to figure out what its big hook is. Given the setting, I want the twist to be supernatural or alien – it screams of something I would see on *The X-Files*. I know I'm probably setting myself up for disappointment, but that's part of what makes games of this variety interesting.

In fact, when you distill them to their most basic parts, there isn't much to them outside of the mystery itself. In Gone Home you walk around a house and look at stuff. Oxenfree is mostly about teenagers walking around, talking to each other. Firewatch is a man walking through the woods discussing life with a person on a handheld radio. These games are jokingly called "walking simulators," but that's a pretty accurate descriptor. When I recommend them to friends, I simply call them mysteries.

The gameplay almost always takes a backseat to the narrative. The element of discovery is the driving force. Once that magic is gone, there often isn't a pull to go back to them. I doubt I'll venture into most of these worlds again. Gone Home was one of my favorite games of 2013, but I have no desire to play it again. If Firewatch's big revelation was spoiled for me, I doubt I would continue playing it.

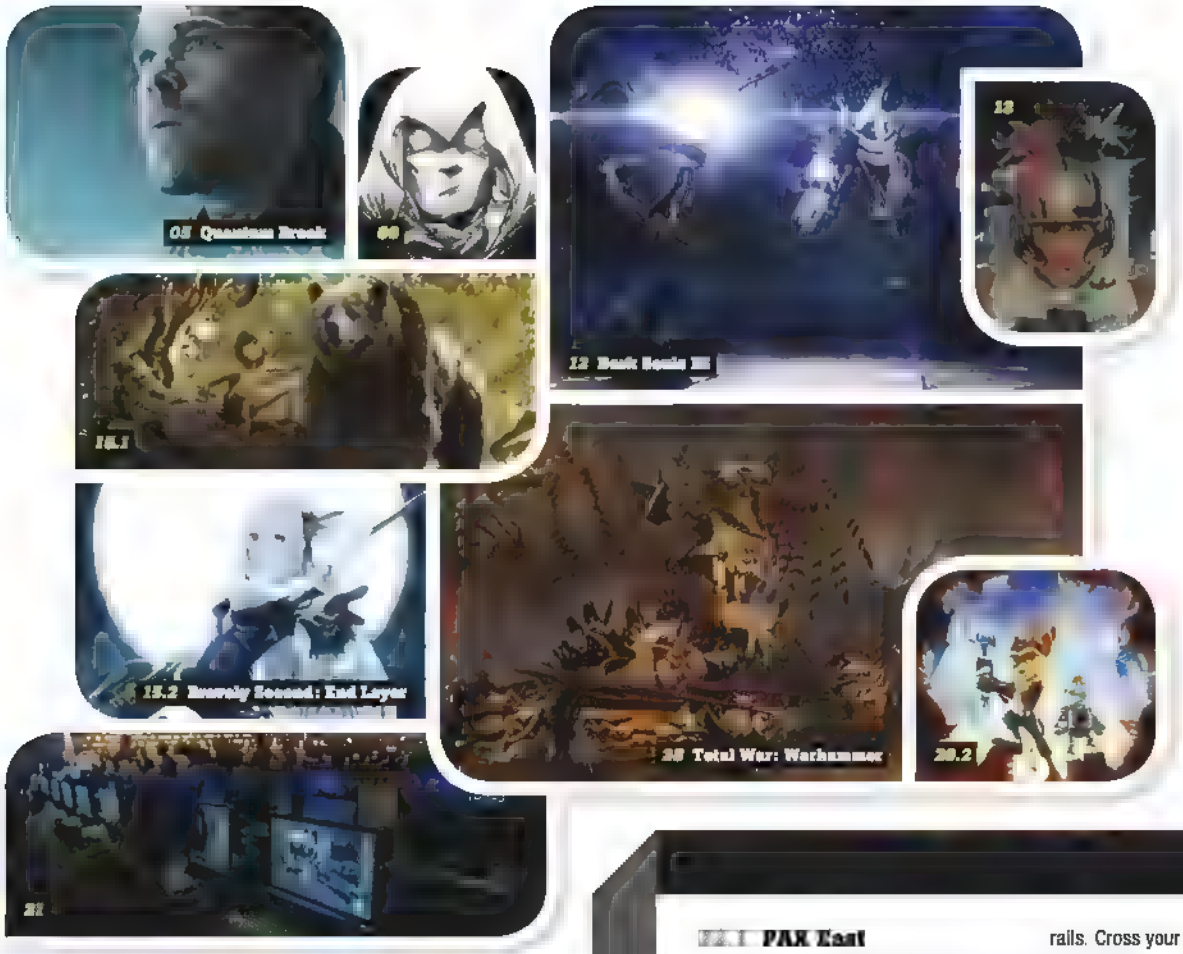
It's a time-consuming risk to dive into these games, but I'm going into them knowing that someone I trust enjoyed them. So far, the voices I rely on haven't steered me wrong. Gone Home, Soma, Her Story, and Life is Strange were all amazing adventures, and thankfully I went into them with just a general idea of what they might offer.

My latest leap of faith is into Firewatch. Right now, with roughly half of the game complete, I'm nervous about where it's going. I don't like my character, the walking and talking isn't that interesting, and I'm mostly continuing on to see if something shocking happens.

I'm entertaining these types of games more than I thought I would. I love seeing developers find new ways to innovate and entertain with storytelling. Not every game needs strong gameplay hooks. I like that we can just walk away from a game saying, "that was a great story."

If you enjoy these types of experiences, do your friends a favor and recommend them with as little information as possible. Sure, they may hate it if they don't like the subject matter you lauded, but it's worth the risk. Some surprises are best left undiscovered, even if it means that surprise is an entire game. ✦

The views and opinions expressed in this column are strictly those of the author and not necessarily those of Game Informer.



April

05 New Releases
- Assassin's Creed Chronicles Trilogy Pack *(Vita)*
- Dirt Rally *(PS4, Xbox One)*
- Quantum Break *(Xbox One, PC)*
- *Star Wars: The Force Awakens (Blu-Ray, DVD)*

06 Moon Knight Returns
Through numerous failed series, Marvel Comics has tried to make Moon Knight a household name, but these efforts have only pushed him further into obscurity Moon Knight's best chance of catching up resides with writer sensation Jeff Lemire (*Extraordinary X-Men, Animal Man*) The first issue of this new series kicks off with our protagonist in an insane asylum Has he been here the entire time?

13 New Releases
- Dark Souls III *(PS4, PC)*
- Ratchet & Clank *(PS4)*

13 Star Wars: Poe Dameron
Leading up to the events of *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, Poe Dameron was investigating historical locations linked to the Force. His findings are chronicled in Marvel's newest series, *Star Wars: Poe Dameron*. The first issue ships today and is penned by Charles Soule (*Star Wars: Lando*).

15.1 The Jungle Book
You don't need to be a Marvel movie to collect some of Hollywood's biggest names in one film Today's theatrical release *The Jungle Book* stars Bill Murray, Ben Kingsley, Scarlett Johansson, Christopher Walken, Idris Elba, and Lupita Nyong'o. Of course, you'll only hear their voices as various animals, but it's an impressive cast for a revered children's story

15.2 New Releases
- Bravely Second: End Layer *(3DS)*

21 Fanfest 2016: Eve Online
This annual three-day gathering in Reykjavik, Iceland, is a celebration of the video game Eve Online. Along with a huge, wide-open space filled with hundreds of people playing the game, this expo offers tournaments, developer roundtables, and a hell of a lot of partying

22.1 PAX East
Most publishers have new games on display at Boston's PAX East, a three-day expo designed for fans of the medium Panels and discussions from the top talent in games occur every hour If history repeats itself, this is also one of the best shows for cosplayers

22.2 New Releases
- Assetto Corsa *(PS4, Xbox One)*
- Star Fox Zero *(Wii U)*

22.3 The Huntsman: Winter's War
Everyone agreed that the worst part of *Snow White and the Huntsman* was Snow White herself (played by Kristen Stewart). For the sequel, which opens in theaters today, the filmmakers wisely decided to remove Stewart from the equation and focus more on the feud between the Huntsman (Chris Hemsworth) and the Evil Queen (Charlize Theron) The great Emily Blunt joins the cast as the Ice Queen.

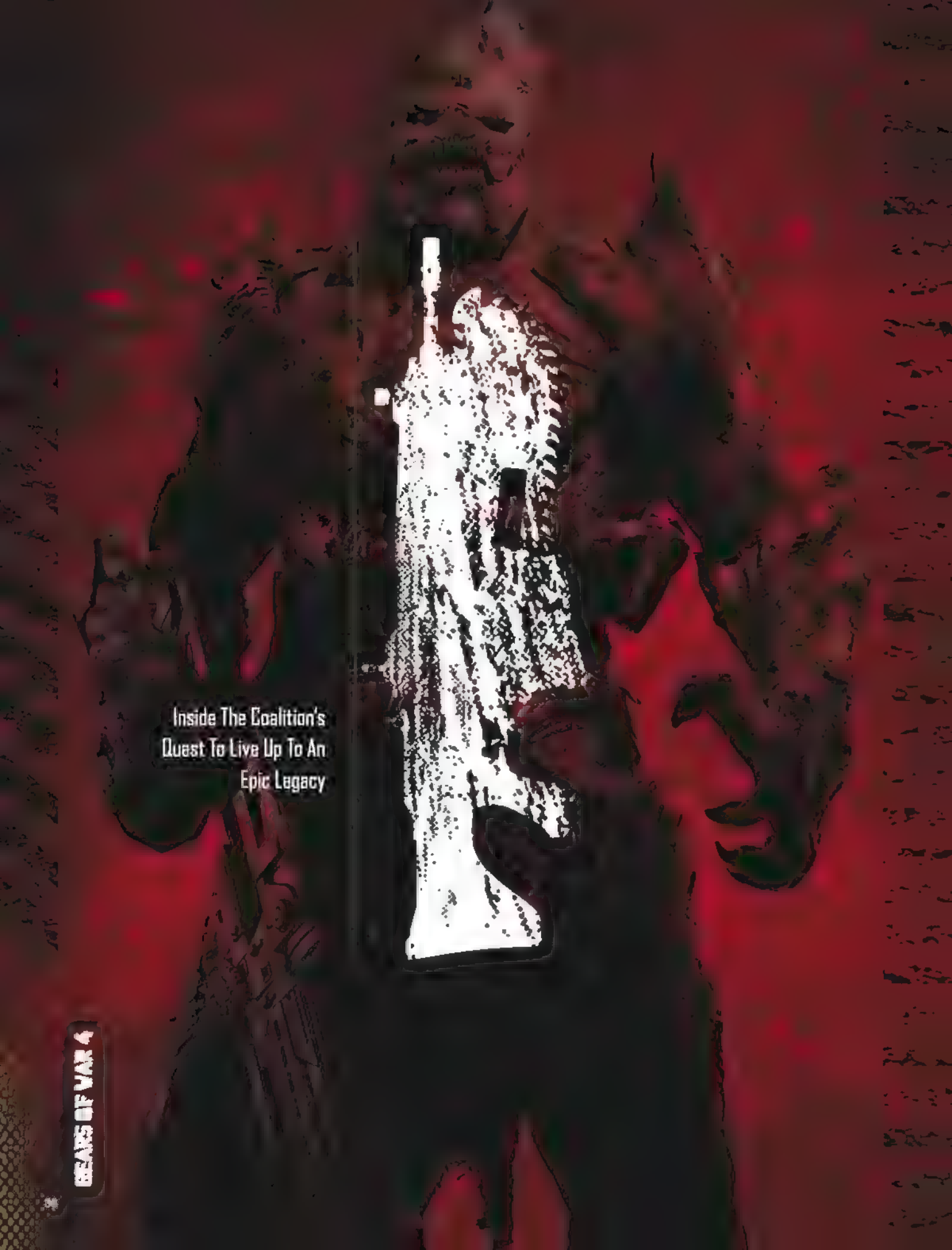
24 Game Of Thrones
Even with George R R Martin not delivering the next *Song of Ice and Fire* book, HBO is continuing on with its *Game of Thrones* adaptation. This season, starting today, goes beyond the material in the books, but hopefully follows instruction from Martin This could be the season that goes off the rails. Cross your fingers and hope for the best, fans.

26 New Releases
- Sega 3D Classics Collection *(3DS)*
- Stranger of Sword City *(Vita)*

28 New Releases
- Total War Warhammer *(PC)*

29.1 IndieCade Festival 2016
Running for three days in New York City's Museum of the Moving Image, this community-focused show invites you to experience the Love and Rejection Exhibit, a roundup of 18 games that explore these themes IndieCade also offers talks from industry veterans and a variety of workshops

29.2 Ratchet & Clank
The problem with video game movies is they are never faithful enough to the source material That's why we're hoping *Ratchet & Clank* finally gets it right. The movie better have hours of mindless box smashing, and hours more of shooting the same enemy types over and over. The script also needs to focus on finding pointless collectibles, and the cinematographer should periodically lose control of the camera to replicate the gameplay experience ◆



GEARS OF WAR 4

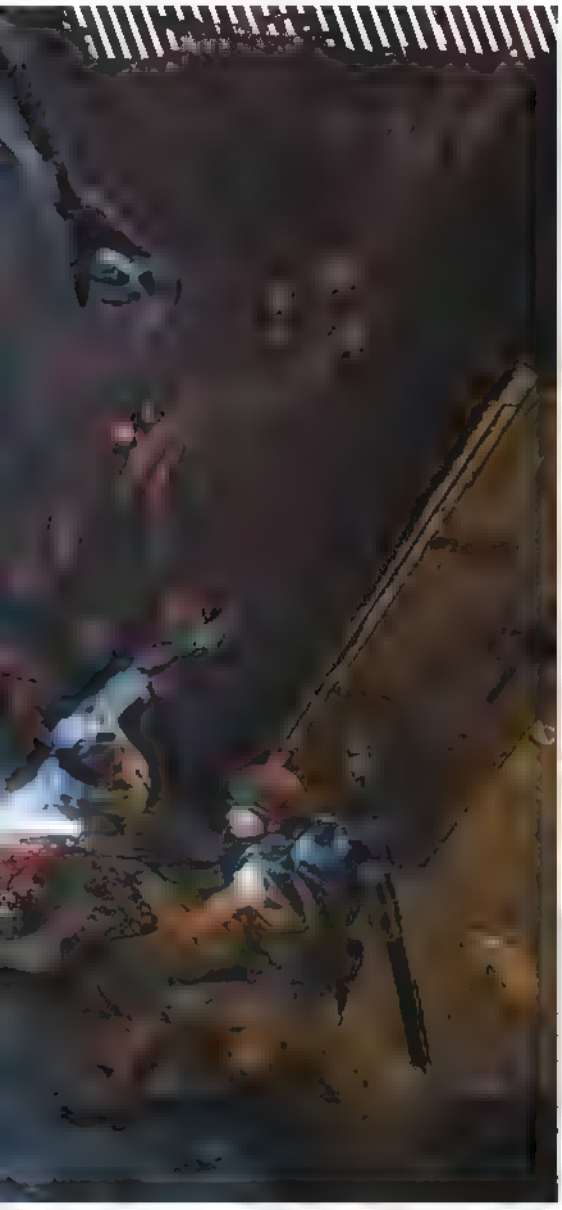
Inside The Coalition's Quest To Live Up To An Epic Legacy

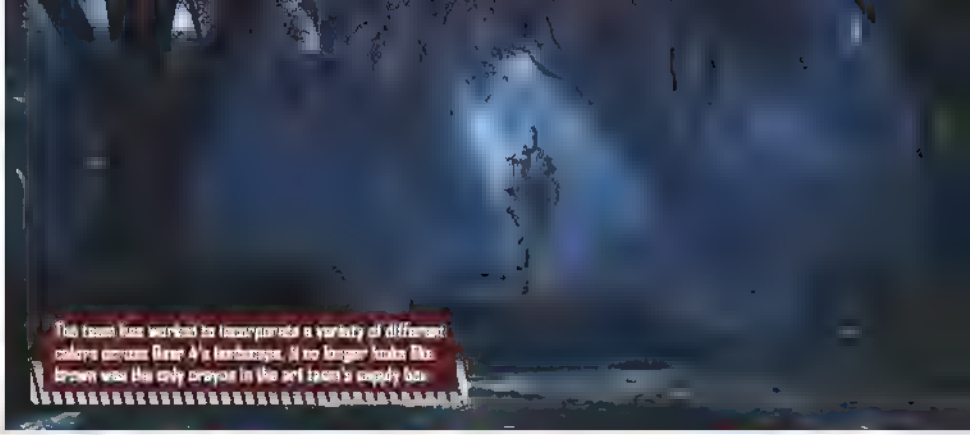
- PLATFORM: Xbox One
- STYLE: 1 or 2-Player Shooter (Online TBA)
- PUBLISHER: Microsoft
- DEVELOPER: The Coalition
- RELEASE: Fall

FROM THE ASHES

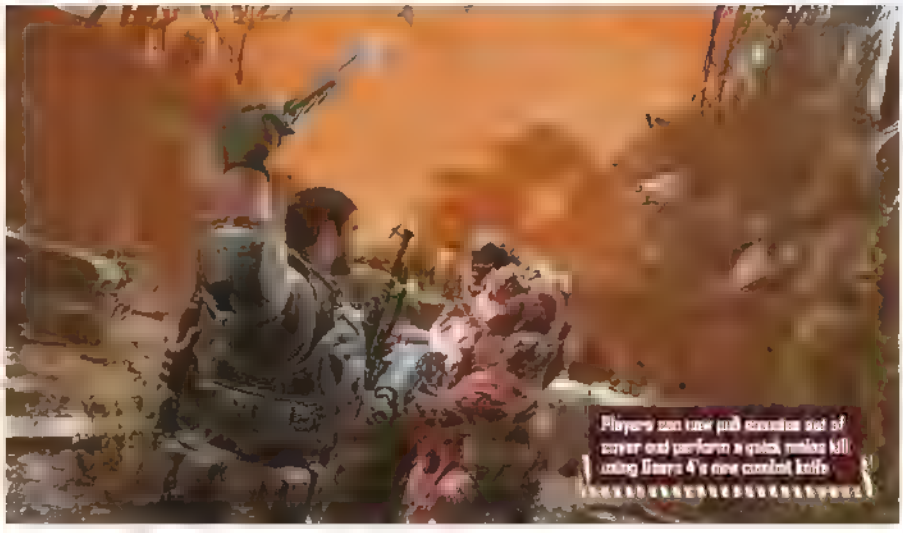
For over 15 years, the world of Sera was on fire. After a previously unknown species of sentient creatures – called the Locust – erupted from the ground, the world exploded in a war that dressed the planet in rubble. The Locust were eventually eradicated, but the war exacted a heavy toll. Nearly 25 years after that epic struggle, humanity has become an endangered species. Survivors huddle together in small, walled cities, and seek shelter from the hurricane-force gales that rip across Sera's surface. In the midst of this ecological meltdown, the next generation of heroes rises up to combat the planet's newest nightmare.

BY BEN REEVES





The team has worked to incorporate a variety of different colors across Gears 4's landscape. It no longer looks like brown was the only crayon in the art team's supply box.



Players can now pull enemies out of cover and perform a quick melee kill using Gears 4's new combat knife.

ON THE WAR PATH

Rod Fergusson never thought he'd work on Gears of War again; not that he'd had his fill. Fergusson was on the ground floor for the development of Epic's first Gears of War. As executive producer and director of development at Epic, Fergusson watched jaws drop when the company debuted the franchise as part of a technology showcase for Unreal Engine 3. He was there when the game released in November 2006 and became the fastest-selling title of the year. He was also there when Gears of War 2 sold more than two million copies on its first weekend. And, of course, he was there when Gears 3 pushed the series past $1 billion in sales, becoming only the second Xbox franchise to ever hit that milestone.

Fergusson's career was practically defined by Gears of War. He even worked as a producer on People Can Fly's Gears of War: Judgment and helped prototype several ideas for where Epic could take the franchise next. However, in mid-2012, when Chinese multimedia juggernaut Tencent purchased a 40-percent stake in Epic Games for more than $300 million dollars, Fergusson felt the company's climate beginning to shift. Epic drifted away from the narrative-driven triple-A experiences that he cherished and started to focus on free-to-play multiplayer titles, such as Fortnite and Paragon. Fergusson knew it was time to leave the studio that had been his home for a major part of his career.

2K Games didn't waste any time signing on this accomplished producer, and Fergusson spent six months helping whip BioShock Infinite into shape before release. However, Fergusson was eager to get back into development on his own projects. 2K offered him the chance to organize his own studio in Marin, California, but after only a few months he realized that he was philosophically at odds with 2K. Fergusson was struggling to find a project that got him as excited to go into work as he had felt when he was developing the Gears of War franchise; he struggled to find a studio that felt like home.

"I had just given my notice to 2K when I phoned a friend at Microsoft and I said, 'Hey I left 2K, and I want to form my own studio. Do you want to come with me?'" Fergusson recalls. "He said, 'Actually, we're thinking about buying Gears, and if you're free that would be kind of a big deal. Would you want to work on Gears again?' I didn't even hesitate. I said, 'Of course!'"

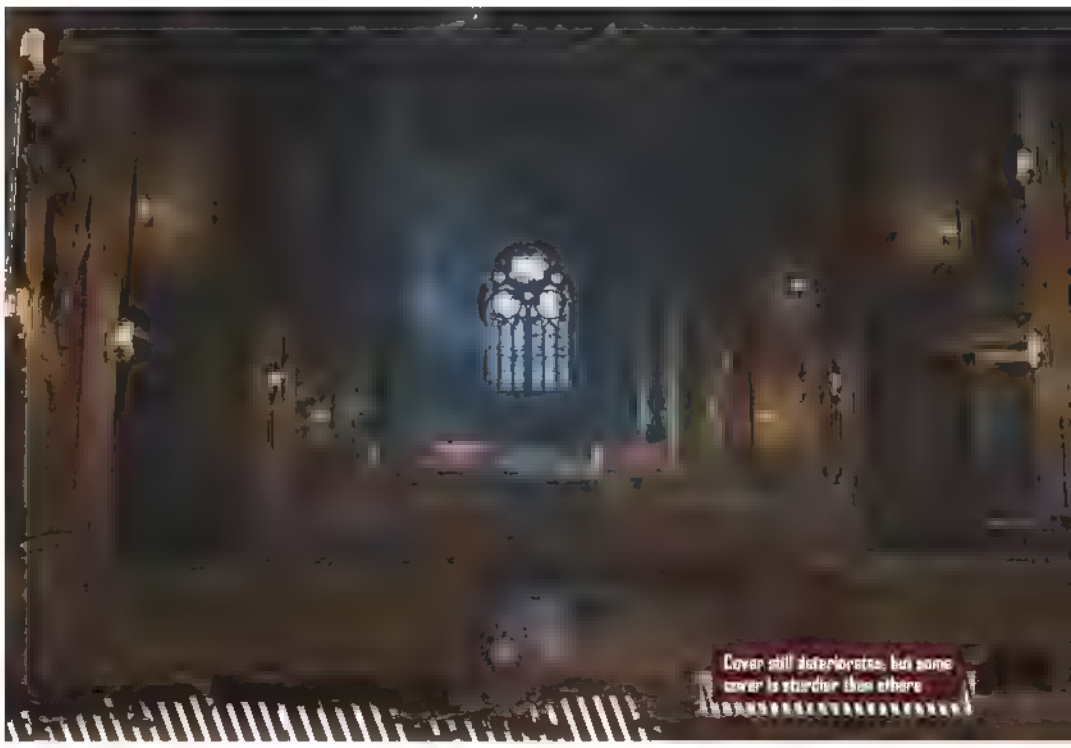
When Fergusson joined Microsoft, he got the rare opportunity to see where Epic had taken his prototypes after he'd left, and he took its ideas for the franchise to heart – for example, some character names and a force called The Swarm. Ultimately, however, Fergusson knew he would have to take the series in a direction that he felt best represented the franchise.

Fergusson's return to Gears of War might have been serendipity, but Microsoft couldn't give the entire franchise to one man. The publisher needed a studio capable of taking the reins on one of the Xbox's biggest properties – a studio that could shepherd the franchise onto the newest hardware generation. It would take a lot of time and money to build a new studio from scratch, so Microsoft made a bold decision and handed one of its most viable properties to a relatively untested team that had yet to release a game.

Near the end of 2013, the Vancouver-based studio known as Black Tusk was composed of around 150 people who were heads down on a new, undisclosed IP for Microsoft. Little is known about this project, but it was a third-person, sci-fi shooter developed in Unreal Engine 4. Black Tusk had briefly teased the project during E3 2013, but the studio had yet to prove that it could release a successful game, let alone handle a multi-million dollar franchise. And yet, near the end of that same year, Microsoft approached the studio with an irresistible proposition: Would it be willing to cancel its existing project and work on the next Gears of War?

"That was a pretty big deal for the studio," says Mike Crump, the director of operations at what was then Black Tusk. "You don't work on something for two years without being invested in it, but at the end of the day the opportunity to work on Gears was a no-brainer. . We talked to the team on Friday. We told them there's a bad news, good news situation. The bad news was that the project we've been working on for the last two years is not moving forward. And then the next slide was: But we're taking on Gears of War. There was kind of this shocked gasp, and then this cheer that started at the front of the room and went all the way the back."

With around 150 people, Black Tusk was much larger than a traditional pre-production team, so Fergusson and the rest of the studio leads had to get creative to ensure that everyone on staff had something to work in those early days. The studio spent a few weeks playing through the old Gears of War games, analyzing their ins-and-outs. The team read the Gears of War novels and comics and studied fan wikis to prepare for in-house trivia competitions. Several designers even rebuilt some of the franchise's most memorable firefights from scratch, such as House of Sovereigns from the first Gears of War, and then remixed them with new weapons, enemies, and environmental geometry.


Cover still deteriorates, but some cover is sturdier than others

The studio's first official release was last August's Gears of War: Ultimate Edition, but this remastering of Epic's first Gears of War wasn't a simple high-definition port. The Gears of War franchise has always lived in Unreal Engine 3, so the studio had to completely rebuild the game, which meant not only recreating old art assets, but completely reprograming everything from enemy A.I. to the cover animations. The work paid off as fans seemed receptive to The Coalition's care for the series, and the game achieved a respectable 82 on Metacritic.

"We have to do it right before we do it different," Fergusson says. "That's the message I came to The Coalition with. We were new stewards to the franchise, and we had to show that we respected the franchise and that we knew the franchise before we went off and did something crazy. We really felt like we had to build up the credibility of The Coalition."

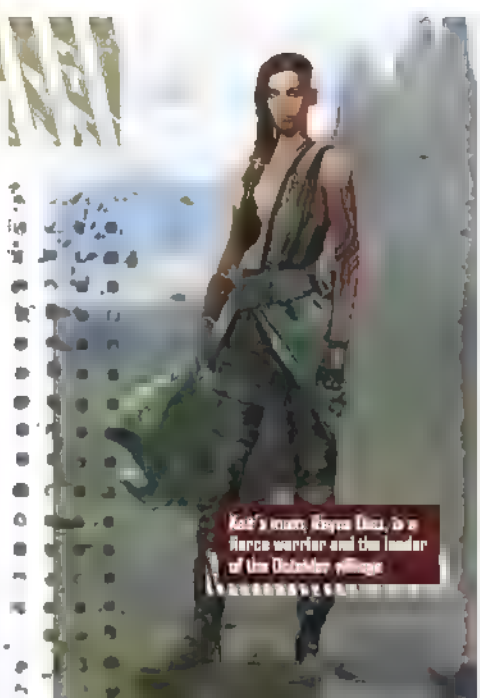
The studio even changed its name from Black Tusk to The Coalition – a less-than-subtle reference to Gears' fictional bureaucracy, the Coalition of Ordered Governments (COG). The name change was important to many at the studio. It meant that the team would no longer develop new IPs, but would be completely dedicated to the Gears of War brand. From that point on, The Coalition would be *the* Gears of War studio.

Gears of War: Ultimate Edition served as The Coalition's boot camp; it helped the team better understand Gears of War's DNA, and proved that the studio understood what made the series tick. With the remaster under their belt, the team felt ready to take Gears of War into a new era.

QUE SERA, SERA

As The Coalition ramped up pre-production for Gears of War 4 they continually found inspiration in one particular part of the world: Northern Italy. Studio head Rod Fergusson became particularly interested in the crags of Italy's Dolomite mountain range while dreaming up the backdrop for Sera's forests. Later on, as the team was researching real-world inspirations for the COG's circular city settlement, Fergusson ran across a late-Renaissance fort town called Palmanova, also located in Northern Italy. Northern Italy continued to come up during several points in Gears of War 4's pre-production stage, so at one point during development, the team took a research trip to the top of the boot.

"Once we hit three or four of these things where everything was pointing us to the same location, we decided to embrace it," Fergusson says. "From an art standpoint it was huge. We were on our way toward shipping the E3 demo and we went to a place called Fort Fenestrelle. While we were there our associate art director said he had to make a call back to the state to tell them, 'Stop! We have stuff we have to change.' The team had to wait for us to get back so they could readjust the fort in the game based on what we got in Italy. There are probably two or three spots in the game that have a clear footprint based on stuff we brought back."


Kait's mom, Reyna Diaz, is a fierce warrior and the leader of the Outsider village

The Coalition designed the highly mobile Javelin as a way to push players out of cover consistently and train players for multiplayer.

THE WAR'S NEW FRONT

When it came to ideas for the next entry, The Coalition had a lot to think about. The ending of Gears of War 3 presented a unique challenge. The entire franchise had been focused on the war between humanity and the Locust Horde. However, at the end of Gears of War 3, Marcus Fenix and the rest of Delta Squad had pushed back against the Locust and set off an energy-wave bomb that killed all the Locust and Lambent. The bad guys were dead; the world was at peace again. The finale wrapped the series up in a nice, neat bow. So, did The Coalition want to untie that bow? How could the team tell a new story, in the same world, that didn't feel tacked on?

"The easiest way for us to make a sequel would have been to pick it up with Delta Squad, pick up with the Locust, and say, 'It's six months after Gears of War 3, and the imulsion weapon that killed the Locust didn't get them all,'" Fergusson says. "We wouldn't have had to worry about any new story formation or world building, but we realized that there was no future in that. It was just sort of turning the crank and churning out more of the same."

Ultimately, the team found a future for the franchise by setting the next game 25 years later. More than two decades after the Locust war, humanity has dwindled to only a few hundred thousand. The imulsion countermeasure that took out the Locust also completely eradicated the planet's fossil fuels, so people have been forced to find alternate sources of energy as they rally under a new COG banner (fans will remember that the original Coalition of Ordered Governments was disbanded by the end of Gears 3). The new COG rounds up the remaining populace and corrals them into walled city-states, banding together for safety.

Not everybody agrees with the COG's approach to repopulating the planet. A second faction of humanity, called The Outsiders, begins forming its own pockets of society in the wilds of Sera. Tensions between these two factions rapidly rise as The Outsiders begin raiding COG settlements for resources.

"There's this notion that the COG is like an overprotective parent trying to preserve life and ensure people's safety," Fergusson says. "The Outsiders are a group of people who are purposely stepping outside the COG and breaking free because they think life isn't worth living unless it's lived free... As we were conceptualizing the Outsiders, we initially started with the hippie movement, but then we realized we wanted them to have an edge and we started thinking of them more like this 1970s motorcycle gang."

This new time period and new social structure seemed like fertile ground for a new entry in the Gears series. It gave The Coalition plenty of room to build something new without completely re-envisioning or overwriting everything Epic had done. More importantly, Fergusson felt like it got back to what was at the heart of Gears of War.

"It felt like, as the series progressed, we lost some of the intimacy," Fergusson says. "The first Gears was a little bit darker and spookier, a little bit more bogeyman under the bed. But as you went through two and three, especially three, Gears became more of a World War II game where the Locust essentially became Nazis in a way. Because the scale had grown, you had gone from this sort of incursion behind enemy lines to a war at a planetary level. Even though we were trying to make the stakes greater, on a personal level, it actually felt like the stakes were lessened."

In order to bring some of that intimacy back into Gears of War 4, the team settled on a story that would feature only three primary protagonists and stretch across the span of only 24 hours. This more intimate story has allowed the team to explore their protagonists' backstories and lineage, making the latter an important theme in Gears of War 4.

JD Fenix is the primary protagonist in Gears of War 4, and as his name suggests, he is the son of legendary war hero Marcus Fenix. Marcus not only helped put an end to the Locust war but functioned as the face of the franchise for its first three entries. Like his father, JD is an idealist. He ran away from home at a young age to become a Gear in the COG militia. He worked his way up to the rank of lieutenant, before a classified incident forced JD to go AWOL. At the beginning of Gears of War 4, JD has sought asylum in an Outsider camp, but the mysterious incident that brought him there, and his estrangement from his father, are events that players will learn more about as they play the game.

JD isn't the only new face in Gears of War 4. Delmont "Del" Walker is another ex-COG soldier who joins JD in the campaign. An orphan who befriended JD at boarding school, Del has followed JD's lead most of his life. When JD joined the Army and became a Gear, so did Del. When JD went AWOL and joined the Outsiders, so did Del. His path is tied very closely to JD's, and it's evident from the beginning of the game that the two share a deep bond.

Kait Diaz is the final member of Gears of War 4's new crew. Unlike JD and Del, Kait was born and raised an Outsider, so she's not familiar with how the COG works, but she's a capable survivalist and provides JD and Del with an Outsider perspective on the world. Kait is also the daughter of the Outsider's leader – a strong, independent woman named Reyna. Unfortunately, Reyna doesn't trust JD or Del thanks to their past ties to the COG.

"With Gears 1, we didn't have a lot of time for backstory, so we had to default to a kind of shorthand with the characters," Fergusson says. "They became archetypes because you really had to understand them right away. Now, I think people are looking for much more nuanced storytelling. We were able to describe Gears of War 1's characters with a couple of words, but I find that it's much harder to do that with JD, Del, and Kait because there are a lot more layers to them. You can't pigeonhole them as, 'overenthusiastic pro-athlete.'"

JD, Del, and Kait form a quick bond, but that bond is tested when their Outsider village is invaded by a mysterious new force and the entire camp is kidnapped and dragged into the forest. The trio gears up for a firefight, and heads into the wilderness in search of their fellow countrymen. But as they begin to uncover the truth behind why they were the only ones spared during the attack, they come face-to-face with a hideous new threat.

READY PLAYER TWO

Gears of War is a co-op friendly franchise, and Gears of War 4 doesn't aim to change that. However, The Coalition is scaling back from Gears of War 3's four-player co-op, so Gears of War 4 only features two-player co-op. Players can play through the whole campaign with a friend via both online and split-screen play.

Player one is always JD Fenix, but player two will get to choose between Kait and Del. While the three characters remain together for most of the game, at times they might get split up, and the story has subtle differences depending on whether player two is Kait or Del.

Wind plays a big role in Gears 4. Players will feel it pushing against them, and the wind will even shift projectiles slightly off course.

MEET GEARS OF WAR 4's VOICE ACTORS

JD FENIX

The son of Marcus Fenix is being played by Liam McIntyre, who is currently playing the Weather Wizard on *The Flash*. McIntyre is probably best known for his lead role in the later seasons of the Starz series *Spartacus*.

KAIT DIAZ

This Outsider native is being played by Laura Bailey. Possibly one of the most accomplished actors in the Gears 4 cast, Bailey is well known for roles like Kid Trunks in *Dragon Ball Z*, Spartan Olympia Vale in Halo 5: Guardians, and Jaina Proudmoore in World of Warcraft.

DELMONT "DEL" WALKER

JD's best bud and longtime companion is being played by Eugene Byrd, who is a recurring cast member on shows like *Bones* and *Arrow*. Byrd also played Marcus "Boomer" Boone in the shooter Battlefield Hardline.

NEW NIGHTMARES

Our demo picks up just after JD, Del, and Kait have set off in search for Kait's mother and the rest of her community. The trio begins their search in a fort built long before the war. Nature has slowly moved in to reclaim the area, but slivers of old brick buildings can still be seen underneath decades of foliage. Within minutes, the crew encounters their first sign of something unnatural: a series of strange, organic pods that look a bit like human-sized cocoons. The group cuts one open only to find the dissolved remains of something that almost looks human.

Our heroes don't have to wait long to find out what these creatures look like fully formed. As they dive deeper into the fort, they watch in horror as one of these pods bursts open and a pale, monstrous creature lunges forward. Within moments, the trio is swarmed by these monsters. Our heroes dub these new beasts Juvies, because they seem to be just the first evolutionary stage of an entirely new army of freaks, called the Swarm.

With the Locust extinct, The Coalition had to come up with a new enemy that paid homage to Gears' iconic monsters and could slide neatly into the franchise's combat without feeling like a complete photocopy. To do this, the team spent months talking with Epic's original designers and ultimately analyzed the Locust army more extensively than its creators ever had.

"Because the Locust were me, Lee Perry, and Cliff [Bleszinski] all coming up with gameplay ideas, there is no inherent logic to them," Fergusson says. "I don't know if we ever sat down and thought really analytically about what role everything plays. We knew it inherently, because the games evolved over time."

Once The Coalition had reverse-engineered the Locust Army, they discovered that it was made up of three primary classes: mirrors, flushers, and pinners. Mirrors are enemies that function a lot like players; they have lots of different weapons, they take cover, and they work in groups to flank the player. Flushers were the kinds of enemies that tried to get players out of cover, and they were usually fast-moving enemies that traveled in packs. Pinners, on the other hand, were the big brutes that did a lot of damage and encouraged players to stay in cover. Usually a pinner would work in conjunction with another unit type to keep players pinned down while the horde closed in.

"This shorthand helps us a lot when designing encounters," says lead campaign designer Matt Searcy. "If an encounter isn't feeling right, you don't even have to prescribe an enemy, you can just say, 'The problem is there is nothing pinning the player down. That's why people are not using the cover layout in this area.' It helps us define problems."

As the first enemy that JD, Kait, and Del encounter, Juvies are the kind of easy-to-kill enemies that try to flush players out of cover. Much like Wretches from previous Gears of War games, Juvies are fast-moving, melee-based creatures that travel in packs and quickly bounce over walls and other obstacles. Juvies might not be hard to put down, but they can call in reinforcements and overwhelm players that don't manage the horde.

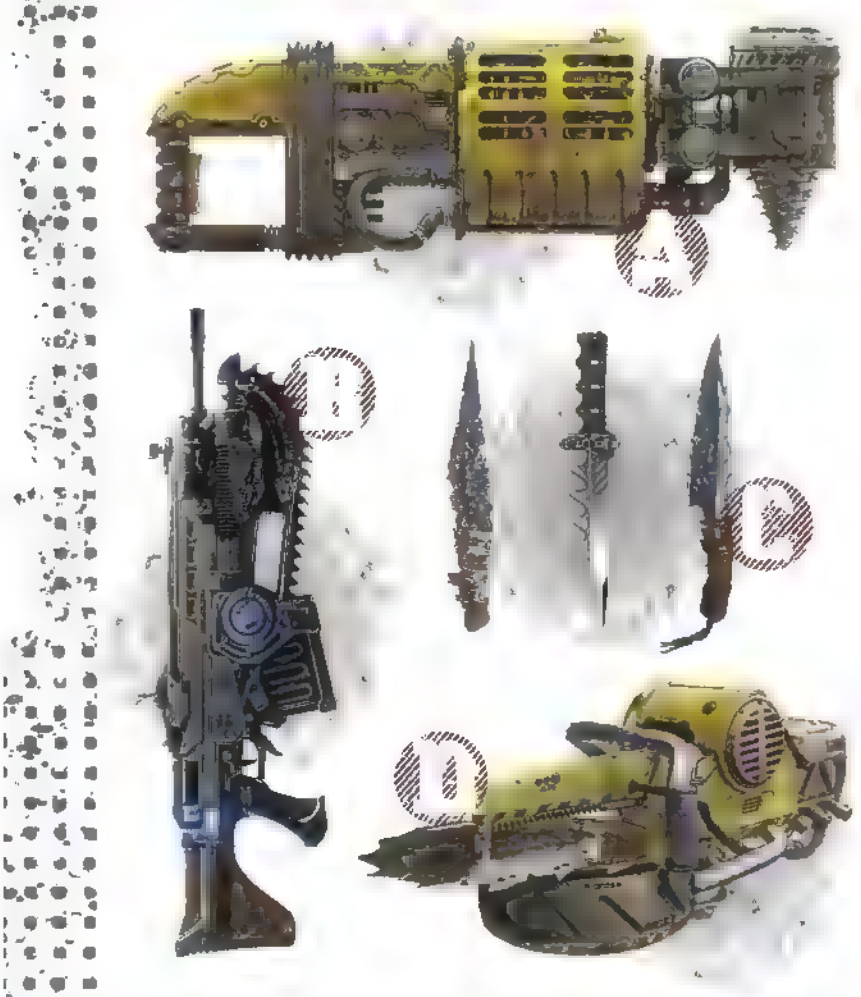
Given enough time, a Juvie might eventually evolve into something meatier. As a Juvie ages, its skin hardens and takes on a deep red, and it eventually learns how to use weapons. This enemy type is called the Drone, named in homage to its doppelgänger in the Locust army. Drones are Gears of War 4's main mirror enemy, and will likely be the primary enemy type in the Swarm.

Thankfully, The Coalition isn't just copying the traditional Gears of War script. The team has already started experimenting with unique enemy types that players haven't seen in previous Gears of War games. A prime example is the giant mole rat-like creature called the Pouncer, which shifts its role based on player strategies. If a player is running out in the open, a Pouncer will likely unleash a steady stream of poisonous quills from its tail that encourage players to dive for cover. However, if the player hides for too long, the beast will switch tactics and jump over the player's cover, knocking them back or even chomping through their armor with shark-like teeth.

Pouncers are highly mobile bullet sponges, but their bellies are a weak spot. During one encounter, we watched JD take on a Pouncer. After the monster had gotten the drop on one of his friends, JD ran over and knocked the creature on its back, exposing its supple belly. After that, a few well-placed shots easily took the beast down. During another encounter, just as a Pouncer was lunging for JD's throat, our hero activated the chainsaw on his Lancer and caught the beast in the gut as it fell on top of him, proving that the Lancer is still a satisfying melee weapon.

WEAPONS

With the Locust Horde six feet under and Sera experiencing an era of unprecedented peace, The Coalition thought it would be strange for the COG to continue to invent new weapons. However, the studio didn't want players running around with relics of a war that had happened 25 years in the past, so the team dreamed up a series of construction-based tools that its heroes could repurpose for combat. Here's a look at how this design direction has shaped some of the weapons in Gear of War 4.



A: DROPSHOT

Essentially an explosive charge attached to a drill that can be lobbed across a battlefield, The Dropshot allows players to choose when to ignite the drill's thrusters and send it hurtling to the ground. The Dropshot fills a hole left by The Digger from Gears 3, in that it allows players to more easily get at enemies hiding behind cover.

B: LANCER

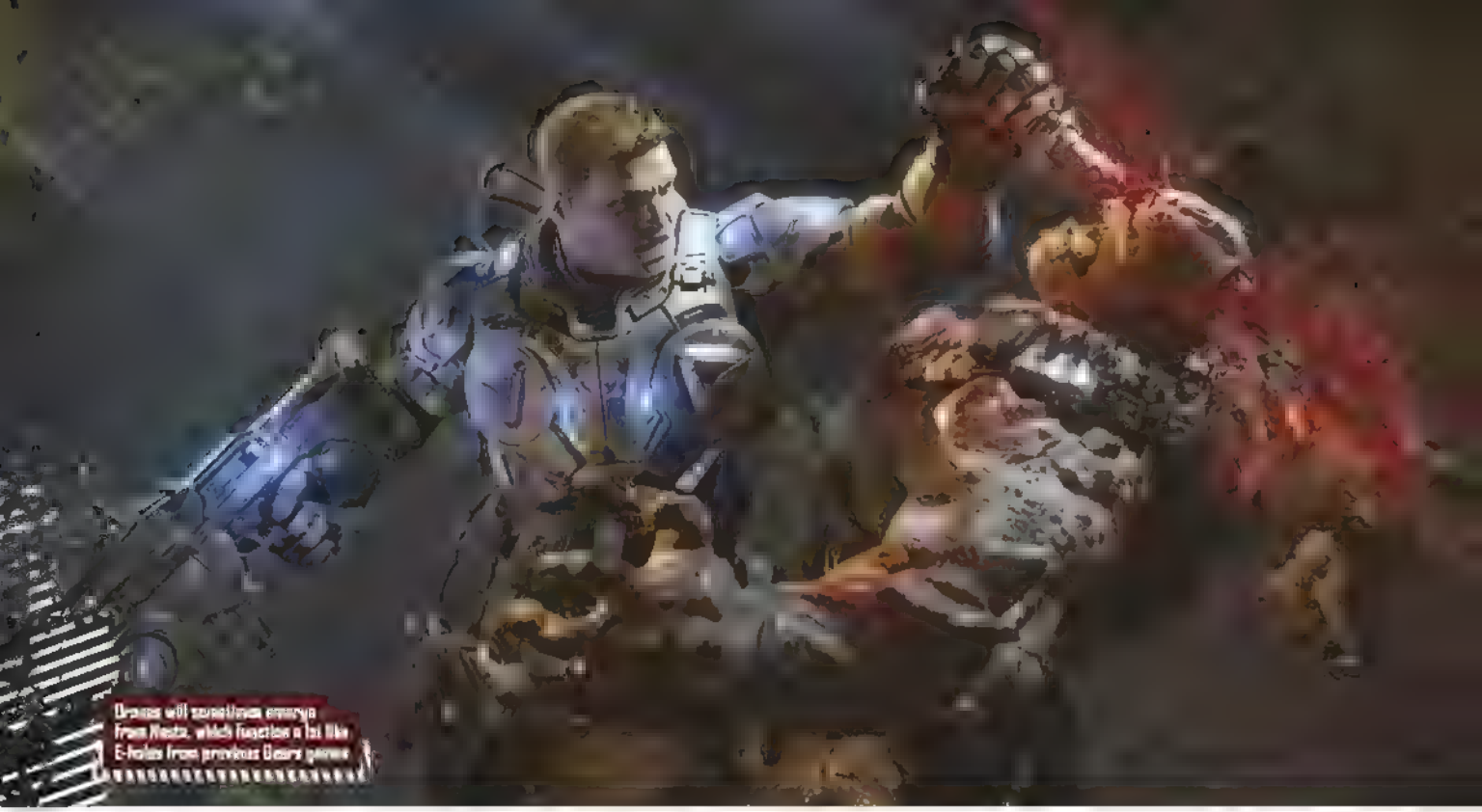
The Lancer isn't new, but Gears of War's bread-and-butter machine gun has seen a few changes over the last 25 years. Soldiers have modified the Lancer slightly, giving it a wooden stock for added comfort. The iconic chainsaw gun also now has a faster reloading clip and an added flashlight to help spot Swarm in the dark.

C: COMBAT KNIVES

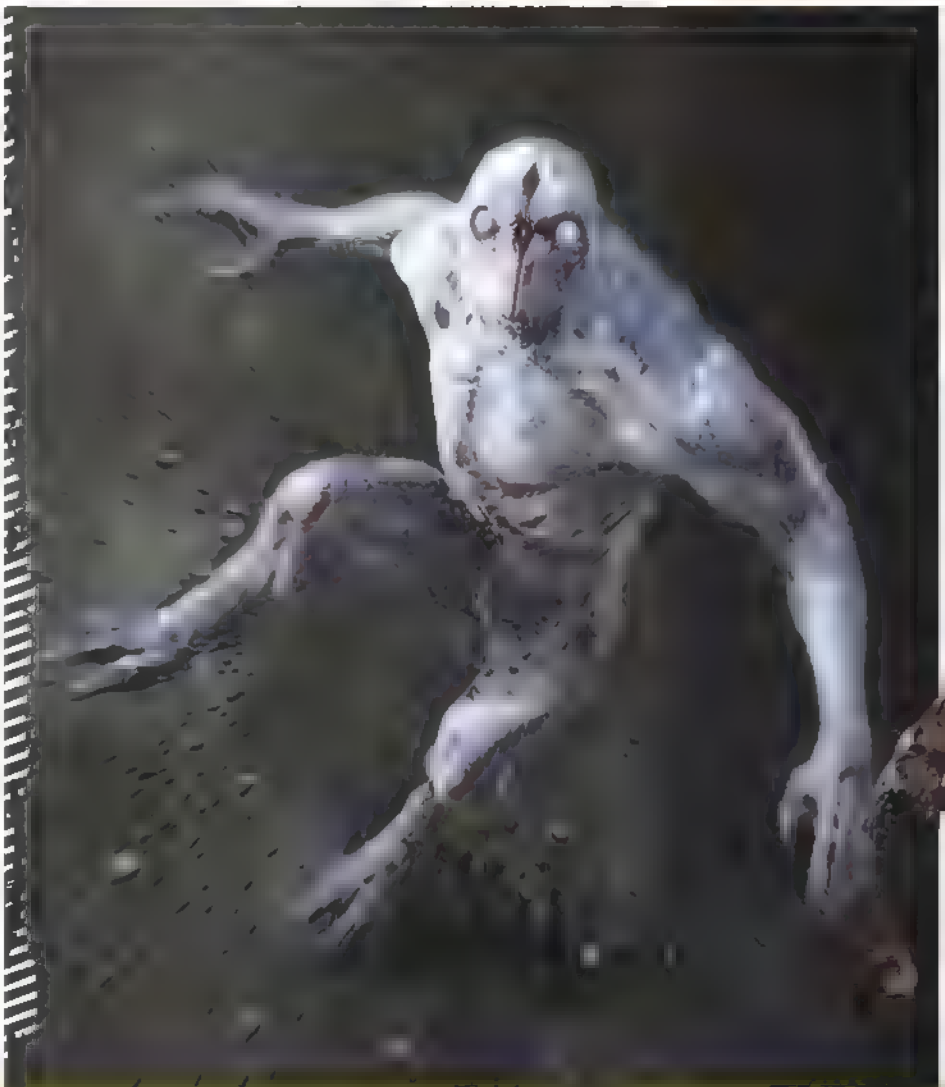
These blades are used for close-quarters melee kills. Melee execution animations vary depending on the player's angle and approach towards their enemy. In multiplayer, each faction has its own knife design

D: BUZZKILL

The Buzzkill takes a few seconds to warm up, but once it does, it spits out a stream of circular sawblades that ricochet around the environment and shred through enemy limbs. However, players should be cautious with the Buzzkill, as these blades can bounce off the environment and fly back and damage them



Drones will sometimes emerge from Nests, which function a lot like E-holes from previous Gears games



Enemies navigate the environment more naturally than in past Gears of War games. They jump over cover, run out from behind each other and are generally aware of each other's presence

COVERING THE BASICS

At its heart, Gears of War has always been a cover-based shooter. While many games over the years have tried to take Gears' formula and build off it, The Coalition feels that Gears of War is still one of the best cover-shooter franchises on the market. So rather than rework Gears' cover formula, The Coalition instead began to tinker with areas where Gears' cover wasn't useful. One of the few areas the studio felt it could improve Gears' action was during close-combat scenarios.

"One of the problems we've always had was with close cover," Fergusson says. "Occasionally you'll get into that situation where two people come onto the same piece of cover and it looks kind of silly. It's kind of *The Naked Gun* moment where the two people are throwing their pistols at each other. One of our big things in Gears was never make the avatar look stupid, so we started to talk about how we could improve players' ability to move over cover."

To help solve this problem, The Coalition redesigned Gears' mantle-kick system, allowing players to more easily vault over a piece of cover and kick their enemies out of defensive positions. Now, players can hop over any piece of cover in one smooth stroke, and if an enemy is on the other side, they are left vulnerable to a quick melee kill from the new combat knife. In addition to the mantle kick, players can also choose to stay in cover and pull their opponent over to their side of the battle before gutting them. Alternatively, when moving out of cover, players can perform a short-distance shoulder charge, which knocks enemies off balance and opens up a short window to sink their blade through the enemy's brainpan.

During our demo, we got to play around with these new cover mechanics, which feel fairly natural and give players a wider arsenal of moves to use when butting heads with the Swarm. These new close-cover mechanics also help accelerate player movement through the environment and create a more natural flow to combat. However, players should be careful not to place themselves in these close-combat scenarios too often, because Swarm enemies are also capable of pulling players out of cover and performing their own takedowns.

GEAR UP FOR MULTIPLAYER

The Coalition recognizes that multiplayer is an important part of the Gears of War experience. Unfortunately, the team wasn't ready to talk about multiplayer specifics and wouldn't confirm the inclusion of any particular modes. However, the team did acknowledge the importance of modes like Horde, and promised that fans wouldn't be disappointed by Gears 4's multiplayer offerings.

"Historically, the campaign is the hardest thing to make out of any of these games," says studio head Rod Fergusson. "So if you look at the development of Gears one, it was probably 50-percent single player, 10-percent multiplayer. Over the course of the franchise, that percentage shifted, but I don't think it ever got above 70/30. Coming here, multiplayer has a much greater position at the table. On day one, as we were prototyping our first campaign experience, we were also building multiplayer maps. We really want to meet the needs of not just recreational players but eSports players, and it's something we've been thinking about for the entire development cycle."

In Gears of War everything looks brutal and heavy

As The Coalition continued to experiment with close-quarters combat, they also looked at Gears' dynamic cover systems. Gears of War has always played around with mobile and deteriorating cover, and The Coalition wanted to continue building on this system. The Swarms pods actually play into this dynamic cover. Not only can players use these pods as cover, they can shoot them to pop them and expose hiding enemies.

During one combat scenario, we watched JD shoot a pod that was clinging to the ceiling, causing it to fall to the ground and become a piece of cover in an otherwise open arena. Moments later he performed the same trick on another pod, which came crashing down on several Juvies' heads, killing them instantly.

"Pods are kind of a risk/reward cover system," Searcy says. "They are placed in strategic places where you can use them to kill people, but each one has a potential to be filled with body parts or a live Juvie. There is also a little bit of a dice roll that you could get a Juvie who screams and breaks all of the rest of the pods in the environment. We're really interested in the idea of the player being able to control the combat a little bit. It's up to you to bring that piece of cover down. You're adding something that you can use strategically, but you're also adding a potential new threat."

The Swarm is definitely a threat to Gears 4's new protagonists, and The Coalition's tweaks to Gears' classic cover system should help players circumnavigate this new army. However, the potentially greatest threat in Gears of War 4 is the planet itself.

GoW WITH THE WIND

Near the end of our demo, JD, Kait, and Del get the idea that The Swarm menace might be connected in some way to the extinction of the Locust, so the trio begins marching toward an old Locust burial ground. After the war, there were too many Locust bodies for the COG to properly dispose of them all. As a result, the dead Locust were corralled into several mass graves. Our heroes believe that one of these sites might hold clues to the sudden appearance of the Swarm. However, as our heroes crest a ridge on their way to the site, they catch their first glimpse of a storm wall – a massive cyclone of dust and lightning – that is currently bearing down on their position.

Sera's ecosystem is slowly dealing with the damage dealt by the Imulsion bomb set off at the end of Gears of War 3. As a result, the planet's weather has become increasingly violent and unstable.

"These storms are like a hurricane meets a tornado meets a volcano," Fergusson says. "We call these windflares, and Sera is constantly being assaulted by these intense storms. You could see them as a sort of background element in our E3 demo, but in the game they are much more than a background element."

The Coalition created a weather system that has four categories of wind. The first category starts out as a heavy breeze, which players see manifested in the environment as trees whip wildly and dust billows across the ground. However as the categories tick up, the wind becomes more violent. In a category three windstorm, players feel the wind pushing against them, and projectile weapons, such as the Dropshot, get dragged off course.

"Essentially we're asking the player to get a feel for the wind," Searcy says. "Partway through the game you're like, 'Oh, I've been using this gun for a while, but now I have to learn how to bend it, and think about which direction the wind is coming from.' If you put the wind behind you, your projectile will travel even farther, but if you throw it straight into the wind, it will fly back and hit you in the head, like peeing in the wind."

While the wind creates new challenges for players to overcome, it also opens up new opportunities to exploit the environment. Some cover loses stability under high force winds, so a couple of bullets may rip it apart and send it flying through the world. Take out a few brace supports, and you could send a piece of heavy machinery barreling across a battlefield, wiping out any enemy that stands in your way.

Enemies are also affected by the wind. They hunker down for safety, but players can quickly destroy their cover and leave them vulnerable. If you cut down an enemy at the knees, they might go flying off like a kite and then slam into a wall and smash apart.

Wind flares are a fight for survival, but they open up new opportunities for players to think strategically. The wind can destroy a lot of cover in the environment, but it might also bring in new pieces of cover, or open up a new flanking route. Ultimately, The Coalition wants players to look back

Gears of War 4 moves back to the traditional Gears control scheme and away from the FPS-style controls laid out in Gears of War: Judgment.

During a category four storm, players must dodge lightning flurries.

at a batt efield after a wind flare and see that it has completely changed the environment.

This only describes what happens during a category three windstorm. Most of the time, players won't even encounter enem es during a category four storm because the elements are so fierce. A category four windstorm is just as deadly as any Swarm monster. During our demo, we watched JD struggle as if being buffeted by ocean waves as he moved from one piece of cover to the next. Then, just as he was about to reach safety, a series of lightning strikes raked across the battlefield, and JD had to dive through these forks to avoid becoming a trail of ashes in the wind.

"Our original idea was that categories one through four would always involve enemies," Fergusson says. "But when we started playing around with the wind, we realized that just trying to survive in a category four – just trying to do that rock-climb ng-like movement to get from cover to cover – was exciting. I was like, 'I don't think we need enemies in a four, but we need someth ng else.' That's where the idea for those lightning flurries came up. I wanted to feel like we were swimm ng through je lyfish, like we were surrounded by danger on all sides and it was beautiful."

THE GEARS KEEP TURNING

Gears of War 4 could be a make-or-break project for The Coalition. It not only marks the return of one of Microsoft's biggest properties, it's a proving ground for a fresh studio that is picking up where Epic left off. Thankfully, everyone on the team is confident that this won't be their last Gears game.

"The idea that we can cut ideas knowing that there's a chance we can come back to them has been really liberat ng," Fergusson says. "Gears 3 was over-scoped, and as a producer on that project, I'll take full responsibility for that. But the reason that was over-scoped was that we all thought it was the last Gears, so we tried to fit in every idea that we thought was great. If we said no to a feature, it was never coming back. Now there is this notion that what we're building is setting the stage for something bigger, so if we have too many great ideas we're okay moving a lot of them to future projects."

Before The Coalition can start planning for those future projects, the team needs to nail the one they're currently working on. The studio has spent the last two years breathing in everything Gears of War. The team might still be unproven, but it believes it is honoring the work of everyone who has touched the franchise before it, while simultaneously pushing the series forward.

"I've been with the franchise for 10 years, and when I pick up and play this it feels like a Gears of War game," Fergusson says. "We had a review where [head of Microsoft's Xbox division] Phil Spencer came in and played the game, which isn't always typica. at that point in product.on. So he played a few batt es and then sa.d, 'Man, it feels like a Gears of War game!'"

To The Coalition, there could be no higher pra se. \

For a more in-depth look at the weapons of Gears of War 4, interviews with the new developers, and videos with the voice actors behind the game, visit gameinformer.com/Gears4

Battle Chasers:
Nightwar
JOE MADUREIRA GOES BACK TO HIS COMIC BOOK ROOTS WITH A NEW RPG

» PLATFORM
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC • Mac

» STYLE
1 Player Role-Playing

» PUBLISHER
Nordic Games

» DEVELOPER
Airship Syndicate

» RELEASE
2016

IN 1998, JOE MADUREIRA RELEASED THE FIRST ISSUE OF A ROLLICKING ARCANEPUNK FANTASY COMIC ENTITLED BATTLE CHASERS. THE LARGER-THAN-LIFE CHARACTERS, EXPLOSIVE ACTION, AND COLORFUL WORLD CAPTURED THE IMAGINATIONS OF READERS. BUT AFTER NINE ISSUES TROUBLED BY SCHEDULING PROBLEMS AND PUBLISHER TRANSITIONS, THE FAN-FAVORITE SERIES WAS LEFT TRAGICALLY INCOMPLETE. NEARLY TWO DECADES LATER, AFTER A SUCCESSFUL CROWDFUNDING DRIVE, BATTLE CHASERS IS COMING BACK, CHARGING INTO THE WORLD OF VIDEO GAMES WITH THE HELP OF THE SAME CREATIVE MINDS THAT BROUGHT US THE DARKSIDERS GAMES, AND THEY'RE AIMING TO SHATTER GENRE EXPECTATIONS IN THE PROCESS.

BY MATT MILLER

STARTING FRESH

While patient fans may have been looking forward to reading more chapters of the Battle Chasers story for years, new converts shouldn't be scared away. Nightwar tells an independent story that marks a new beginning in the sword-and-sorcery epic. In fact, creator Joe Madureira has committed to finally returning to the comic medium to finish out the story left unfinished at the close of the graphic novel's ninth issue. The next three issues will wrap up loose threads and pave the way for the storyline of Nightwar. "This is a big deal for us," Madureira says. "It's going to be presented as a standalone adventure, and you'll get to know the characters as you go, as if you had no previous knowledge of them."

Like the original comic, Nightwar draws heavily on the familiar tropes of classic fantasy storytelling, defined by big action, archetypal heroes, and world-threatening villainy that must be stopped. "Battle Chasers was itself inspired by JRPGs and anime, and that culture in general, so this project sort of brings things full circle," says lead designer Ryan Stefanelli. The arcanepunk aesthetic draws heavily on spells, legendary magic items, and towering monsters, but injects a technological edge through the presence of robot-like metal golems, projectile weaponry, and airships.

The new story finds the party of heroes united in pursuit of their missing companion, the powerful wizard named Knolan. Gully, Calibretto, and Garrison recruit the infamous Red Monika to commandeer an airship to track down their friend, only to have rival sky pirates shoot them out of the sky. The crew crash-land on Crescent Isle, where they discover inhabitants besieged by a growing army of the undead. The force is led by the return of a wicked vampire lord, and the party must confront the resurgent Dark Prince. "One of the reasons I did the comic series was my love for Dungeons & Dragons and all that stuff I grew up on," Madureira says. "I never really got to do a lot of monsters in the comic series – I was getting to it. So this game is the opportunity to finally add all that. One of our favorite settings is the Castlevania-like fantasy horror-type world. So we created this island where they could encounter that."

DELVING DEEP

Battle Chasers: Nightwar draws on a number of inspirations to fuel its gameplay, but at its core it's a callback to classic dungeon delving. Players repeatedly guide a team of adventurers into one of several dungeons, gathering power and loot before returning to a central hub to rest up before venturing forth once again. Layer on RPG storytelling, beautiful comic book-style cutscenes, item crafting, and JRPG-esque turn-based combat, and there's a lot to explore.

WHILE DUNGEON BACKDROPS ARE CONSISTENT, THE LAYOUT OF ANY GIVEN DUNGEON IS DIFFERENT EACH TIME YOU ENTER

EVERY CHARACTER HAS MULTIPLE PATHS TO SPECIALIZATION, SO PLAYERS CAN DECIDE WHO TAKES ON WHAT PARTY ROLES
PLAYERS CAN UNCOVER HIDDEN SHRINES AND OTHER VALUABLE SITES DURING THEIR JOURNEYS

The hub is the beleaguered town of Harm's Way, a tiny bastion of civilization under assault on Crescent Isle. Developer Airship Syndicate describes the town as a bustling center where much of the story is established, with unusual characters to meet and places to gear up for subsequent adventures. Players can visit the inn to manage their party or relax at the tavern for an amusing arcade minigame, among other distractions.

"Crafting is the primary way to improve your items," Stefanelli says. Crafting resources are found in dungeon rooms and among monster loot, and artisans in town slowly level up as you have them complete recipes and gift them upgrade tools. Any given crafting opportunity has a chance to result in a higher quality version with better stats, and you can add "sweeteners" to increase your odds. In a unique twist, some of the crafting stations are hidden in the depths of the various dungeons.

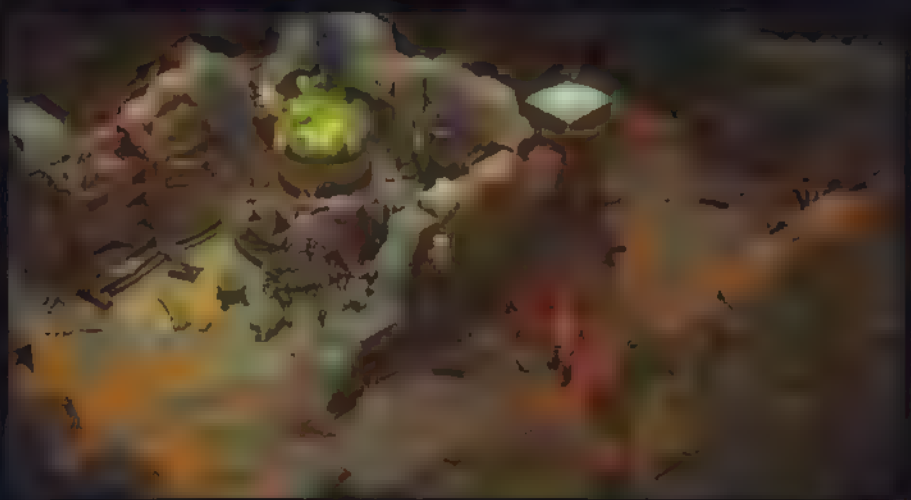
Those crafting expeditions are just one of many reasons you might venture into a dungeon. These explorations are the chief loop of the game. Beyond choosing the mission and dungeon tileset, players also select between five difficulty settings. Harder dungeons equal rarer creature fights and bigger rewards in the form of items and crafting resources. In addition, players can set dungeon modifiers before venturing forth. These consumable items change the structure of the upcoming dungeon before it is finalized, like spawning every monster as an elite, but with dramatically increased loot. Higher difficulty dungeons allow for more modifiers to be placed, ensuring you can build some unusual challenges for yourself.

Constraint breeds creative thought, so you're also forced to make tough choices about who and what you bring along for your adventure. "We want to enforce decision making," Stefanelli says. "When you leave town, preparation is an important part of setting out." Only three companions can join you, and each has specific combat and dungeon abilities that could make all the difference. A very limited inventory size also means you have to choose what helpful items to stuff in your backpack. Care is warranted; perish on your adventure, and the loot you've found on that outing as well as anything else in your inventory is lost.

Inside the dungeon, adventures play out in third-person. Each dungeon is randomly generated from a pool of hand-constructed dungeon rooms, so you're unlikely to ever see the same configuration more than once. The rooms themselves have defined borders, but their internal layout, creature placement, and trap dispersal change. "The core experience here is still combat, but we want the dungeons to have their own moment in the spotlight," Stefanelli says. "We wanted them to have an action feel, even if the pacing is deliberate."

"Monsters are visible," Madureira adds. "One of the JRPG tropes we decided to avoid was running on an empty map and suddenly getting attacked. Enemies have different ways of aggroing on you. Some are more passive. Some are patrolling. Some can ambush you." Archers might target you from a distance, and reduce your health before you can engage in battle. A lich might spawn additional skeletons if you don't hurry to defeat him. In turn, your heroes each have special dungeon skills that can help to avoid unwanted conflict, overcome traps, or find hidden secrets. By instantly switching between which of your three selected heroes appears on screen, you can take full advantage of your party's skills.

Battle Chasers has always had a deep and imaginative fiction behind the action, and Airship Syndicate wants to tap into that depth of setting. At the same time, the developer recognizes that not everyone cares about digging into the lore. With that in mind, the team has implemented a clever system called lore points. Carefully explore dungeons, and you find books, gravestones, plaques, and more, with content you can read to learn about the history and setting. But even if you don't dig into the background narrative, finding those hidden caches of narrative provides lore points – the chief way to upgrade character abilities. Fully investigating the world is the best path to high-powered heroes.

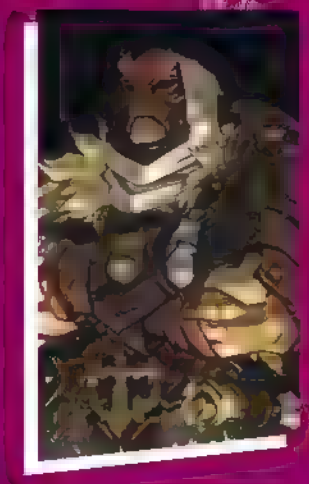


A Band Of Heroes

Each party member in Battle Chasers: Nightwar is a hero in his or her own right, just like in the original comics. The stars of that original story reunite in combat, along with at least one new face confronting the forces of darkness. "The books are so driven by the party of characters, so it's hard to imagine a game that wouldn't take advantage of the whole team," says lead designer Ryan Stefanelli.

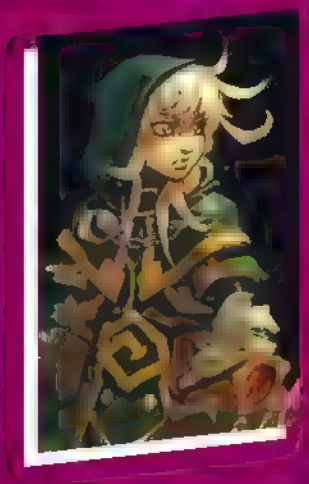
Even in character development, the idea is always to provide compelling decisions to the player. "Each hero has more than one role, but you can only equip a certain number of abilities when you take them into combat," says animation director Steve Madureira. "You can focus them. Each character has multiple specs. You can make a wide variety of party types."

Let's meet the cast.



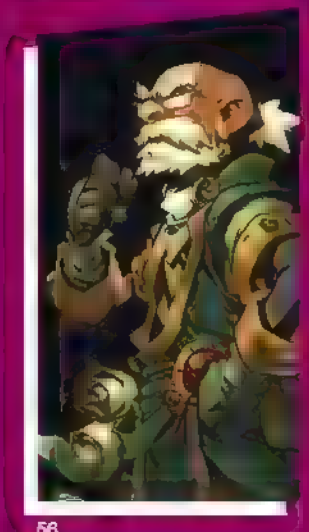
Alumon

Fans know the Battle Chaser characters from the comics, but Nightwar introduces a new hero into the mix, inspired by the game's gothic-horror setting. The devil hunter named Alumon comes to Crescent Isle to halt the return of the Dark Prince and his undead minions. Part of an order of devoted battle priests, Alumon can heal the troops as well as smash a corrupt and blighted creature with his unyielding shield in hand. The details regarding his backstory and abilities remain in development, but it's exciting to know that at least one new hero is joining the ranks.



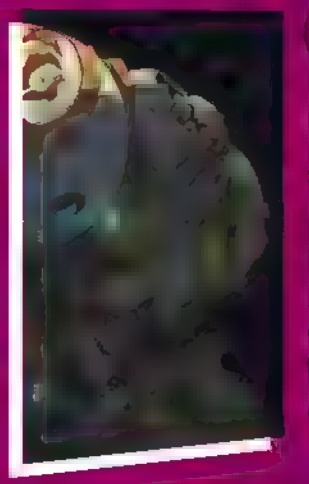
Gully

The heart of the Battle Chasers fiction is a young girl named Gully, the daughter of a great warrior named Aramus, whose mysterious disappearance looms over the entire comic series. She inherited his legendary gloves, which provide near invincibility and super strength. As such, she's an unlikely tank that can hold the line against enemy attackers, as well as dish out some punishment of her own. When taking the lead in dungeon exploration, her gauntlets have a ground-pound ability that can stun enemies, allowing for a hasty escape or an advantage in combat.



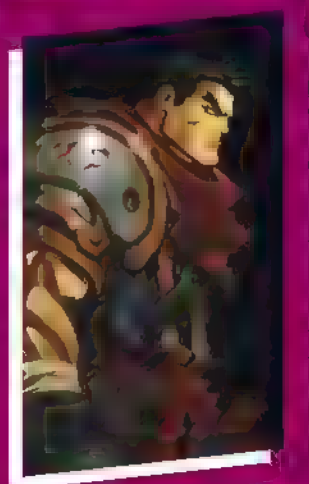
Knolan

One of the last great mages, Knolan's backstory remains unknown. Suspected to be truly ancient, Knolan's mysterious past haunts him, even as he is recognized as one of the world's most accomplished practitioners of the arcane arts. As the story begins, Knolan has vanished, and his disappearance triggers the other Chasers' journey. At some point, we know that he must be reunited with the crew, as he is one of the playable heroes in Nightwar. In battle, Knolan unleashes devastating spells against entire enemy forces, but his magic also enables him to be a potent healer. Put him in the lead while exploring, and he can brighten dark spaces, revealing secrets and hidden enemies.



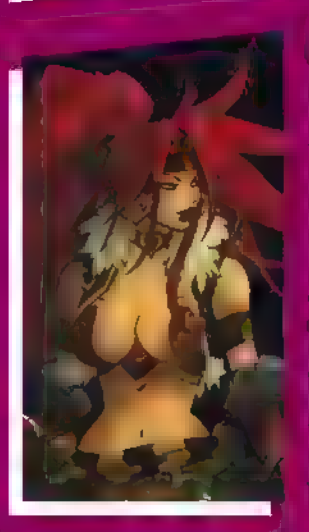
Calibretto

A sentient war golem, Calibretto is a remnant of a concluded war for which he is no longer needed. He has found purpose through communion with nature, companionship with the mighty wizard Knolan, and an unshakeable protective instinct toward Gully. His massive arm cannon can damage foes, but he also acts as a healer. When wandering the dungeon, Calibretto can blast foes, diminishing their health pools before the combat screen even triggers. A second ability lets him rejuvenate party health between fights.



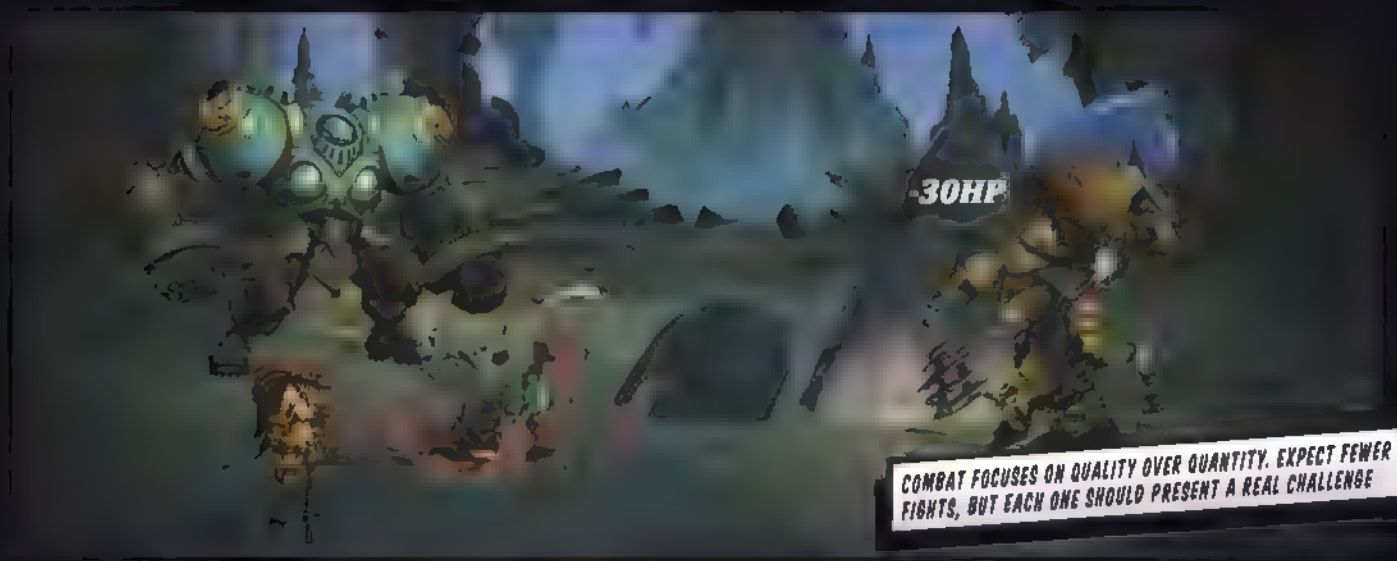
Garrison

Friend to Aramus, Garrison is a legendary swordsman. Troubled by the untimely death of his wife, Garrison fell into a drunken despair. He emerged from despondency to fight and protect his friend's daughter, and once again prove himself a hero. With his magical blade by his side, Garrison's chief party role is one of high damage output, but he supplements that with magical abilities that can buff his friends and debuff his enemies. When leading the dungeon group, he has a quick dash that can be used to slip past undesired encounters.



Red Monika

Monika took to thieving at an early age, and is now one of the most notorious pirate outlaws. She has a tangled past with the fallen paladin Garrison, which has been further complicated considering they stand at opposite sides of the legal spectrum. When Knolan goes missing, Red Monika commandeers an airship to lead the rest of the Battle Chasers in pursuit. In combat, Red Monika can debuff her enemies as easily as she strikes them with her lightning-fast daggers and pistols. She wields classic rogue skills within the dungeon, picking locks or even enemy pockets outside of battle.



COMBAT FOCUSES ON QUALITY OVER QUANTITY. EXPECT FEWER FIGHTS, BUT EACH ONE SHOULD PRESENT A REAL CHALLENGE

COMBAT WITH A TWIST

Many gamers have a soft spot in their hearts for classic turn-based combat, but the tedium of trash fights against repetitive enemies isn't always part of the nostalgia. Airship Syndicate is aiming to hold on to the best parts of the familiar combat paradigm, but simultaneously tweak the formula to keep every fight fresh and engaging.

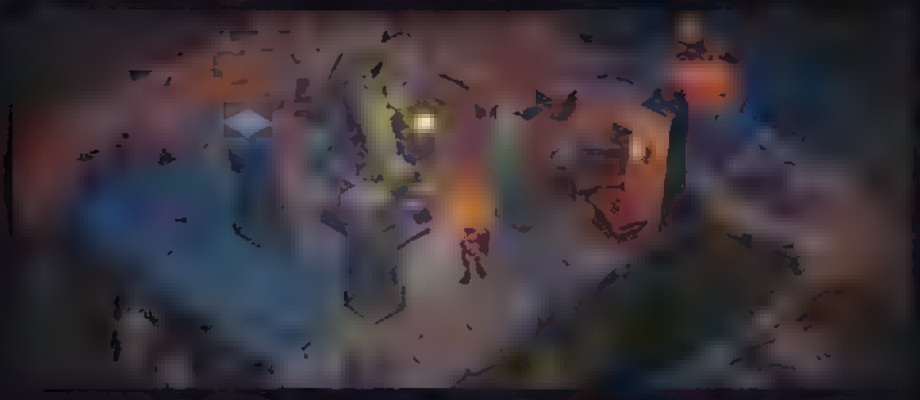
"We didn't want to have a standard attack," Stefanelli says. "We wanted to force players to use mana in virtually every fight. We also have fewer fights than a traditional JRPG that has random battles. We push the player into a corner and force them to make tough decisions about their resources – it's a key part of our design." Even the first encounter during a sortie demands you manage your inventory, conserve your mana, and choose your attacks and defenses carefully.

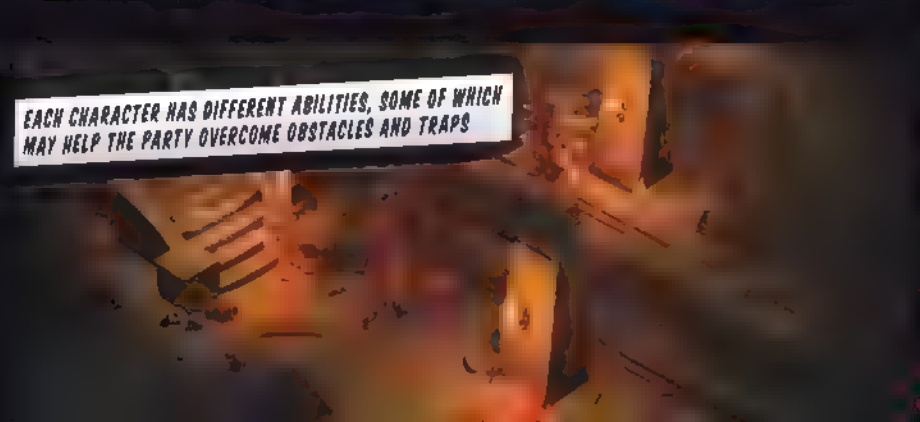
One of Nightwar's most intriguing features is its clever approach to ability and spell use. Two distinct mana pools fuel those actions, but each resource is attained in different ways. Blue mana is a finite resource that carries over from battle to battle. Like a standard magic-point system, it depletes after spells and abilities are used, and the primary way to regain it is by the rare rest point that might be hidden somewhere in the dungeon.

Meanwhile, red mana is accrued in each battle, starting at zero as the fight begins, and increasing through the use of specific actions. Red mana is always consumed before blue, so a wise player may often spend the early turns of a fight accruing red mana before unleashing high-powered mana-dependent abilities.

"What makes the combat stand out is that in addition to juggling your mana resources, all your abilities are going to affect your initiative order – something you're constantly competing for with the creatures," Madureira says. Both hero and enemy units sit somewhere on the initiative bar, as determined by their speed. Complication arises because of random effects that target particular slots in the initiative order. Enter a room with lava, and one initiative slot may gain fire-based effects. Enter combat while in a poison cloud, and one of your Chasers may be stuck inside a poisoned slot. Hero abilities may move you around the initiative bar, so not only are you thinking about the direct effect of a power, but also where that effect places you in the subsequent turn sequence.

As each character grows in power, players are faced with the dilemma of specialization. With more abilities than slots into which those abilities can fit, do you make a character a focused damage dealer or a support healer? Like much of Nightwar's feature set, player choice is central.





EACH CHARACTER HAS DIFFERENT ABILITIES, SOME OF WHICH MAY HELP THE PARTY OVERCOME OBSTACLES AND TRAPS

A HELPING HAND

Despite meeting its funding goals on Kickstarter, several of Nightwar's stretch goals remained out of reach. Enter Nordic Games, the company that not so long ago purchased Darksiders from THQ – the same project helmed by many veteran developers at Airship Syndicate. "I had gotten to know the guys at Nordic shortly after they acquired the Darksiders license," Stefanelli says. "We started talking, and they would occasionally hit us up and ask us questions about the IP. After the Kickstarter campaign closed, we started to talk with them about acting as a co-funder and publisher, and help us reach some of the stretch goals we'd narrowly missed out on."

For gamers, the newly announced relationship means that many of the bonus goals that were once out of reach are now moving forward, including voice acting, a new set of dungeons called mana rifts, and additional cinematic sequences.

Battle Chasers: Nightwar has the potential to introduce a whole new group of fans to a long-dormant universe. If Airship Syndicate can tap into what once made fans so hungry for more comic issues, the role-playing game world may have a new franchise to embrace.

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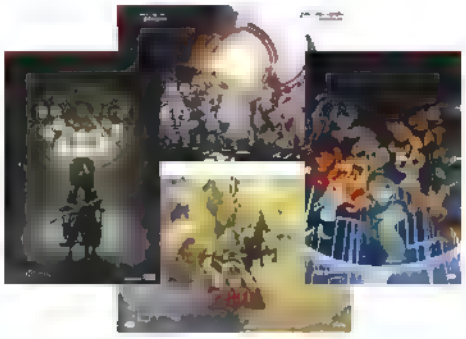

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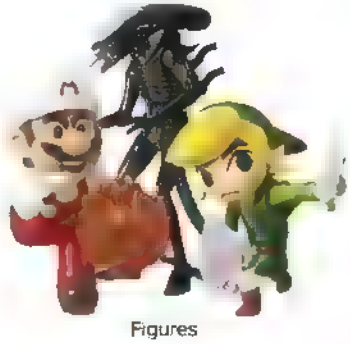

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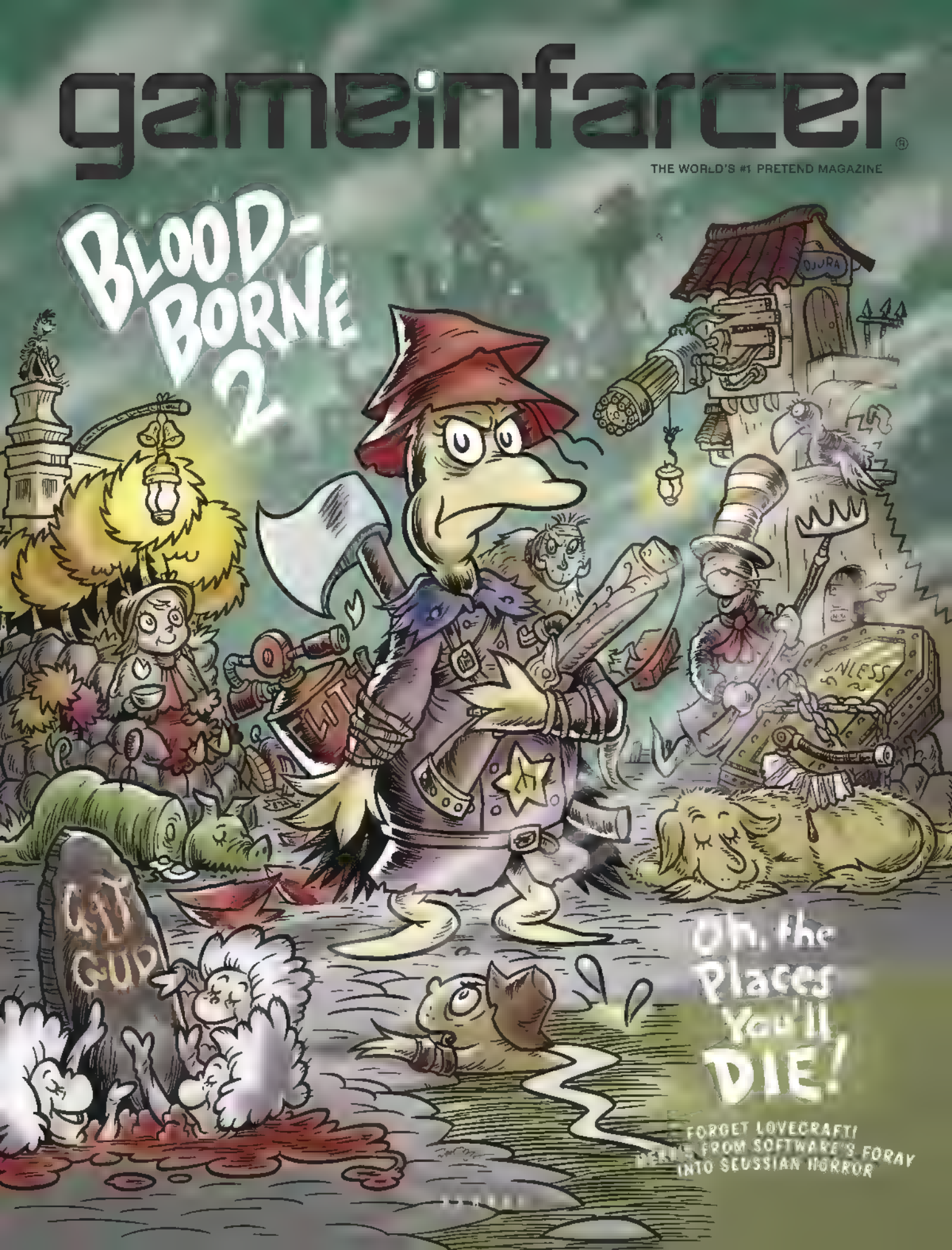


DARTH CLARK
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

For the correct opinions about the video game industry, follow @GI_Darth

Painters put their signatures in the corner of a canvas. Movie directors get credited prominently in trailers. Authors have their names right on the cover of their books. Notice something missing from that list? Yep, video games – and that's the way it should be.

Last year, Konami made headlines by rightfully asserting its ownership over the Metal Gear series (the development of which it has been funding for nearly 30 years) by removing Hideo Kojima's name from the front of the box. It didn't take you morons long to complain about "erasing" the creator, regardless of the fact that Kojima's name appears after each mission and that he actually appears as a character in the game! Metal Gear Solid V was basically the most expensive and labor-intensive selfie of all time, yet you cry foul about a few letters removed from a box.

The experience of playing games is what's important, not the people who make them. It's time to wake up: Games are entertainment. They aren't art like paintings, films, or books. They're toys, plain and simple. When was the last time you bought something from Lego or Hasbro and saw the name of the individual creator emblazoned on the packaging? Oh, is the answer "never"? Of course it is.

Cheers,

Darth Clark

Yes, genius, I understand the irony of signing my name to this column so everyone knows I wrote it. Last time I checked, writing was considered art. Get over it.

VR Is The Future... Of Crime

After a rash of suspicious burglaries in Silicon Valley, police have apprehended Oculus founder and inventor Palmer Luckey (which, in retrospect, is obviously a criminal's name) in connection with the incidents. The victims were exclusively owners of the Oculus Rift headset – their valuables stolen while they were immersed in virtual worlds. The tech kingpin confessed, revealing that his entire VR business was a ploy to render consumers vulnerable and unaware.

"I got excited about VR when I realized I could use the headsets to execute elaborate pranks on my friends," Luckey says. "I started simple, like putting 'kick me' signs on them or drawing dongs on their clothes. But then I realized how disconnected people were from the world around them... so I started taking their stuff and selling it on eBay."

Luckey broke into customers' homes while they were using the Oculus Rift VR headset, loading up his burlap sack with iPads, stereos, and jewelry. When asked how he knew exactly when his victims were using VR, Luckey simply stated: "We're owned by Facebook."

New Destiny Expansion Adds "Brand New" Content

In response to fans growing restless after a string of lackluster updates, Bungie has announced what it claims is Destiny's biggest expansion yet. You want new tasks, more depth, and added variety? You're getting them.

Fans can look forward to mirrored versions of Destiny's PvP maps, new enemy variations (pictured left), more online-only Grimoire Cards, and a day/night cycle ...maybe. "Do we already have a day/night cycle?" asks Bungie's David Dague (aka DeeJ). "If we don't, it's gonna be in this new expansion for sure."

As if that weren't enough to keep players from complaining constantly about a game they have played and enjoyed for thousands of hours, Bungie is finally adding the most-requested feature: matchmaking for Destiny's six-player raids. To use the system, players simply visit one of the new matchmaking terminals located at the Tower. Activating one of the virtual monitors launches your system's web browser. "From there, you can visit your Destiny fan site of choice and connect to other players. It's as simple as that!"

THE AWKWARD YEARS

Empathy games are a dime a dozen nowadays, but Lionel Anderson's one-man indie hit, The Awkward Years, eschews the somber drama of similar genre titles for non-stop hilarity. *– Interview by Darth Clark*

This game is getting laughs from gamers all over the world. What do you think makes it so successful?
Mostly a fundamental misunderstanding about my intent, which I've been trying to clear up since release. The Awkward Years is a collection of playable memories designed to help players identify with the pain of being an ostracized child. It's not a comedy.

Don't be so modest – this game is hilarious! The protagonist, affectionately known to players as "Loserboy," is...
It's not affectionate, it's derogatory – and that's *not* his real name. He is purposely unnamed so that players can truly embody the character and empathize with his torment. However, his experience is based on my own childhood.

Oh, man! You're Loserboy?! What was it like living through all those side-splitting gags?
Look. They're not gags – this was my life!

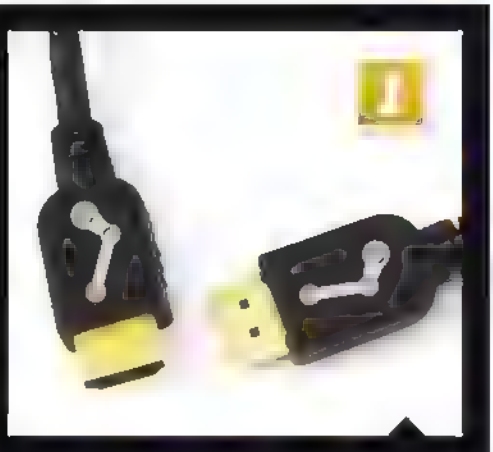
Ha ha, you sound just like Loserboy! My favorite was when you peed in your pants while asking out Cindy Winters.
[Quiet sobbing]

Hilarious!

Backward Compatibility Drive For PS4

In order to compete with Microsoft's backward-compatibility initiative, Sony has released a new accessory that lets users play old games on PS4. Just plug it into your system's USB port and you're ready to waste a Saturday going back to that library of PS3 titles you forgot you owned. Caution: The drive weighs 11 lbs. and can injure pets and/or children if it falls off the shelf.

$259.99 *PlayStation.com/OldIsNew*



1 Steam Pipes

Steam Machines were expensive and confusing, so Valve is rethinking its approach to entering the living room. The company has partnered with 23 different cord makers – from Honeywell to Monster – to manufacture Steam Pipes. These unique cables connect your PC to your TV, allowing you to play games on the big screen. Each brand has its own release date, specs (i.e., length), and price point. Finally, a living-room solution that makes sense.

$49.99 - $179.99 *Valve.com/HDMI*

g.b.u

THE GOOD
Sony recently made the surprise decision to abandon all of its first-party publishing efforts and buy Kickstarter. "We'll just use whatever shows up on there," said Sony president and CEO Kaz Hirai.

THE BAD
After already getting pulled and re-released once already, the latest version of Batman: Arkham Knight on PC is buggier than ever. The game now identifies financial records on your computer and automatically publishes them to Facebook. The game is also able to tweet embarrassing photos and un-clear your browsing history.

MORE BAD
Due to a lack of data to analyze, the FBI announced the shutdown of its division dedicated to spying on households via the Kinect's microphone and camera. Our thoughts go out to those affected by the surprise closure.

THE UGLY
Amiibos have souls.

QUOTABLE
"Wait – that giant button in the middle of the controller is a touchpad? Huh."

— Mark Cerny, lead architect of the PlayStation 4

Undertale HD

A bigger, badder time

» **Platform**
Determination

» **Style**
1-Player
(8-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Fox Industries Ltd.

» **Developer**
Toby Fox

» **Release**
Temmie wANT

Developer Toby Fox has enjoyed rampant success since his humble RPG love letter, Undertale, released last year. Following his development victory, Fox has taken the ridiculous profits and applied them to a new project: remaking Undertale in his grand, original vision.

"That indie-retro schtick is so old," Fox says. "I wasn't intentionally going for nostalgia or anything. I wanted an expansive and immersive world – like Skyrim or The Witcher 3 – but that was expensive. So, I went with what was cheap and easy."

Undertale HD overhauls the original's low-rent visuals with photorealistic 3D models. Fox has also licensed cutting-edge tech to create more realistic bone textures for Sans and Papyrus, and a complex biological simulation allowing Flowey to grow in real time. Plus, the new open-world structure boosts the original's meager playtime to upwards of 80 charm-filled hours.

The massive, 300-person team is also developing a revamped introduction that clears up some ambiguity. "Your character's origins, motivations, and gender will be obvious right away," Fox says. "I just kind of forgot about that stuff before. Sorry." » **Darth Clark**

New Call Of Duty [Working Title]

Lost in the shuffle

» **Platform**
TBD

» **Style**
30-or-so-player shooter? Isn't that what we usually do?

» **Publisher**
Activision

» **Developer**
Probably Infinity Ward

» **Release**
November 4

Call of Duty is one of the hottest series in gaming, and I visited Infinity Ward to get the scoop on 2016's inevitable installment. I was awkwardly greeted at the front desk by Call of Duty: Ghosts' executive producer Mark Rubin, who clearly wasn't expecting me.

"No, no, no. You've got it wrong. Treyarch is releasing Call of Duty this year," Rubin told me. "I mean, yeah, we've got some rough ideas for Ghosts 2, but we haven't even started production yet."

I told Rubin that Treyarch's Black Ops III released in 2015, and Sledgehammer Games released Advanced Warfare in 2014, meaning it was probably Infinity Ward's turn to create a Call of Duty. "Are you sure?" Rubin said, nervously mopping his brow, "I feel like we *just* released one."

After a heated phone call with Activision, Rubin assured me he was in fact just joking and that development is right on schedule. He also gave me the first exclusive screenshot of the game (pictured below), which contains hints to a number of the game's new features. Look for it on store shelves November 4. » **Darth Clark**

History Of An Icon: Bubsy

Mario. Sonic. Jak. Ratchet. Mario again. Over the years, we've covered the extensive catalogues of every major platforming star. From the legendary to the beloved, we've already hit them all. So, here's Bubsy now.

Bubsy in Claw Encounters of the Furred Kind

Bubsy 2

1993 — 1994 — 1996

Bubsy in: Fractured Furry Tales

Bubsy 3D

[redacted]: Ep. 4 – [redacted]

Make your own review!

Style 1-Note Adventure
Publisher Telltale **Developer** Telltale
Release Sporadic and inconsistent **ESRB** E-M

When Telltale announced plans to create an episodic adventure based on [redacted], fans were *(adjective)*. The (Circle one: *TV show / comic / game*) certainly has a unique vibe, but does it work as a game?

The story picks up after last episode's cliff hanger, which saw *(Hero)* cornered in a [redacted], with a *(predatory animal)* inching closer. That situation is resolved (Circle one: *immediately / within minutes*), so you don't need to worry about any consequences. The *(banter-like noun)* between [redacted] and *(dopey guy)* is still the highlight, even though fan favorite [redacted] makes a brief appearance!

We're still waiting to see the payoff for several threads, like saving *(dumb kid)* from that *(brand of strip mining excavator)*, or encouraging *(character who will die in the next episode)* to pursue love with a childhood crush. On the technical side, if you've played any other game in the last *(number 1 through 10)* years, Telltale's signature graphical style is underwhelming. Even so, I can't wait to see if everything comes together in the finale. ▪ **You**

Everything

» Concept
After a strong start in early episodes, the story is losing its direction

» Graphics
Telltale's tech is really starting to show its age

» [redacted]
The two celebrities reprising their roles really phone it in

» Playability
Poorly implemented action scenes detract from the narrative

» [redacted]
If you're a fan, you will enjoy the opportunity to explore this world again

» Replay Value
None, since the choices don't matter

Rocket League 2: Boatsball

Should never have been shipped

Style 1 to 40-Player Watersports
Publisher Psyonix **Developer** Psyonix
Release April 18 **ESRB** Eh

Rocket League developer Psyonix found a hit on its hands with last year's arcade sports sensation Rocket League. As the follow-up shows, they shouldn't have tried to turn it into a double. Rocket League 2: Boatsball combines the concepts of vehicles and baseball, pulling the worst elements from both (boats, baseball).

The game plays like traditional baseball, only with boats. After hitting the ball with your boat's mast, you have to race over to the next base, hoping that the current doesn't drag you away from the safe zone. Conceptually, it's a pretty terrible idea, but in practice it is even more dismal.

Players can choose between two water settings, deep and off. The problem is, the ball sinks to the bottom if you choose the deep setting, where it's irretrievable. Switching to the off setting moors the boats, and players can only hopelessly whirr their rudders. On the plus side, you can make your boat all glittery and put a top hat on it. » **Darth Clark**

$500

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Boats and baseball why not

» Graphics
We still can't tell who – or what – is in the bleachers

» [redacted]
A peppy nautical-themed score keeps the action interesting

» Playability
You use a controller

» [redacted]
Weakly

» Replay Value
Possibly

2015

Bubsy Two-fur

Star Fox Zero

A delay has done wonders for the high-flying adventure

Wii U

Style
1 or 2-Player Shooter

Publisher
Nintendo

Developer
Nintendo

Release
April 22

When we previewed Star Fox Zero at E3 2015, it showed promise, but had a number of red flags. We were told it could be completed in about as long as it takes to watch a movie. By itself that's not a big problem, as Star Fox games are designed around replay. The trouble was Nintendo didn't seem to be targeting a deeper challenge for experienced players.

After months of feedback from internal testing teams and fans, Nintendo decided to delay Star Fox Zero. The result was a hit to the company's financial position, robbing the Wii U of one of its most recognizable titles during holiday 2015.

As is often the case with legendary designer Shigeru Miyamoto though, extra time yields better results. The Star Fox Zero I recently played fixes some of the issues from eight months ago. It now resembles earlier entries in the series, restoring some of the missing elements and our faith.

Before I picked up the gamepad, Nintendo showed me a brief video detailing the substantial changes. In June 2015, no galaxy map was planned. It's now back. The Arwing wasn't going to have its traditional smart bombs. Those have also been restored.

"Certainly with games today, we take the approach of wanting to make sure that as broad of an audience as possible can play the game," Miyamoto tells me. "Sometimes what that means is we'll lower the difficulty level. We really rethought it this time with Star Fox and said, 'One of the key features of Star Fox is that challenge and overcoming that challenge.' The game does have the ability for you to fly around in an invincible Arwing. For newer players they can enjoy playing that way."

Nintendo gave me control of the Arwing in a tutorial arena. This combined both the on-rails elements that have been part of the series since the Super Nintendo debut and all-range mode, which gives players freedom to fly around an arena-like setting, dogfighting with antagonists and flying through rings. Much like in Star Fox 64,

Amiibos At Play

Put aside your dreams of Slippy and Peppy Amiibos. They aren't happening (at least not yet). However, if you happen to have a Fox or Falco figure, you'll get some added use from them in Star Fox Zero. We don't know what Falco will do yet, but tapping a Fox Amiibo unlocks the classic low-poly Arwing from the original Star Fox. This not only changes the look of the ship, but also the music on the opening Corneria stage and the weapon effects. The smart bomb looks exactly as you remember it, and the lasers sound as they did in 1993. Amiibo support isn't vast for Star Fox Zero, but what we know of so far is a nod to long-time fans. We can only hope Falco's unlock is equally appealing as Fox's.

all-range mode is used frequently in boss battles.

After easing back in to the dual television and gamepad screens, as well as the motion-controlled targeting, the team threw me in the deep end. If you were concerned about Star Fox Zero's difficulty, put those fears to rest. The later stages are overflowing with enemies, bullets, and tight passages to navigate.

Nintendo has abandoned the prescribed method of playing, which was to hold the gamepad in front of you to easily flick your eyes between third-person and cockpit views. I played with the tablet-style controller closer to my lap and looked down only when needing precision shots. Slight motions are enough to move the crosshairs, and a simple tap of the Y button re-centers the motion control. Later on, I became comfortable using the minus button to swap the views on the television, eliminating the need to glance away almost entirely. Using both simultaneously was still a good option for boss battles in all-range mode.

I also had a chance to check out the branching paths. When I saw the game at E3, I was told these would simply be hidden areas in the level with alternative goals. Now, they are alternate courses with different boss battles and a path through the game that presents deeper challenge.

You won't be able to locate them immediately, so expect to return to previous stages to explore with equipment earned by completing later levels. The result is a galaxy map with sub-stages and branching paths that will make Star Fox veterans feel right at home.

The original intent was to make Star Fox Zero accessible, and the added difficulty required Miyamoto and Platinum to make some adjustments. Players are able to make themselves invincible to enjoy the game. A co-op mode also allows the player using the gamepad to aim and fire, while someone using a pro controller or Wii remote and nunchuck flies.

Star Fox Zero already feels like a more complete experience. No longer does it carry the burden of potentially being a half-measure. I'm eager to get more time with what now seems to be a full-fledged game and not a hastily assembled evolution of a tech demo.

» Michael Futter

Star Fox Guard

At E3 2014, Miyamoto revealed two prototypes for Wii U. One of them, Project Guard, now has a home in the Star Fox universe. Star Fox Guard is a clever defense game that tasks players with destroying robots before they can steal items from your base. You have a number of cameras to move around in order to locate and blast the intruding automatons. The result is a fast-paced and engaging, albeit simple, experience. In addition to approximately 100 Nintendo-created levels, players can design and share their own challenges. It isn't quite Star Fox Maker, but it's another nod to Nintendo's faith in its community's role in the creation process. Star Fox Guard will be sold as an eShop title and will release alongside Star Fox Zero. Those who purchase Zero at retail will get Guard bundled in as a second disc.

Homefront: The Revolution

Betting big on co-op

» PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC • Mac

» 1-Player Shooter
(4-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Deep Silver

» **Developer**
Dambuster Studios

» May 17

Competitive multiplayer has defined the majority of first-person shooters for more than a generation, to the point that some contemporary games are forgoing meaningful single-player content altogether. This reality makes Homefront: The Revolution's counterculture approach to the genre so welcome, as it's focused primarily on delivering an open-world single-player experience of driving out the invading Greater Korean Republic army from the streets of Philadelphia. To complement this core mode, developer Dambuster Studios has opted for a cooperative experience called Resistance Mode that more closely matches the game's overall theme.

"Gamers these days are spoiled for choice when it comes to PvP multiplayer," says senior narrative designer C.J. Kershner. "[Resistance Mode] is something we can offer that is very different and new that they're not going to be getting from other games."

This four-player cooperative experience offers 12 instanced missions that challenge ragtag groups of fighters with a variety of tasks aligned with driving out the occupying force. There may not be a narrative through-line with these missions, but all are tied in with the overall objective of taking back the city.

Before setting out, players must first pick a player class. Unlike your traditional military-focused classes, Resistance Mode lets players choose from everyday occupations like auto mechanic or exterminator, which influences the skills you start out with. For instance, a mechanic is better at scavenging for parts, while the exterminator has more success using explosives against enemy infantry. No matter how you start, you can gradually upgrade abilities along four skill trees however you want using experience accrued from completing missions.

Each mission drops you into a micro-sandbox with a clear objective, such as infiltrating a GKR base to steal vehicles or defending a forward operating base to give the resistance fighters enough time to escape. No matter the

Before jumping into a Resistance Mode match, you can alter your character's load-out

objective, it's up to your squad of four to come up with the plan of attack. Moving cautiously and formulating strategies on the fly is paramount to success, because if you are spotted early on the GKR may respond with the full force of their nearby platoon, including attack vehicles, snipers, drones, and heavies.

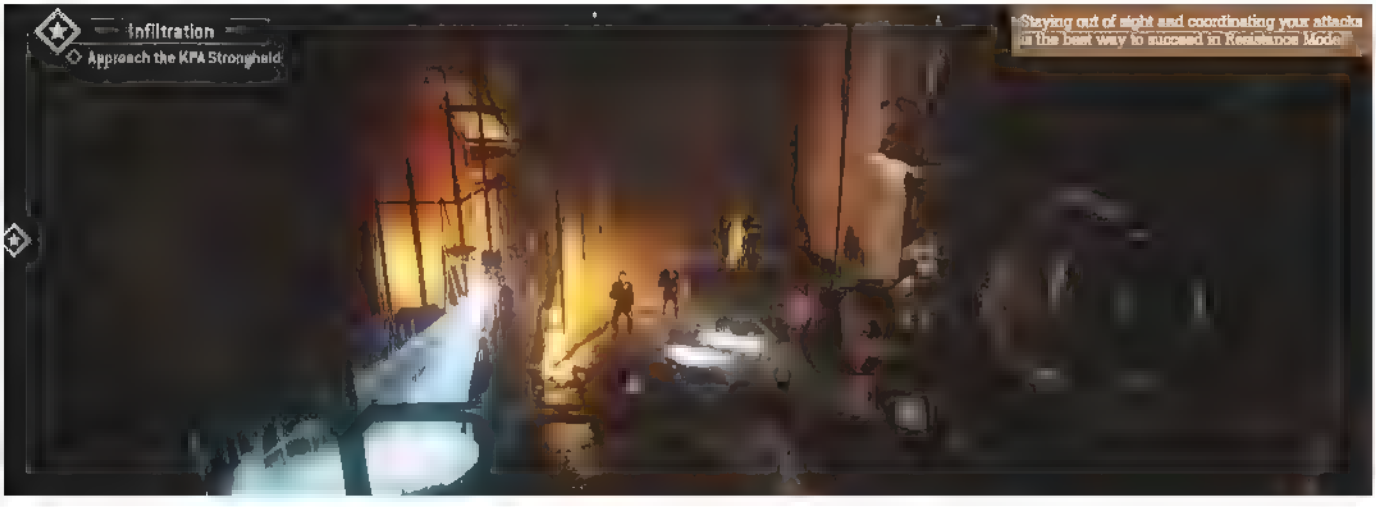
To give your squad a better chance of survival, you can scavenge abandoned buildings for supplies that can be combined to make improvised weapons like explosives, molotovs, and hacking devices that temporarily take over enemy vehicles and turn the guns on the aggressors. These supplies respawn in different locations each time you play the missions, and become more scarce as you ramp up the difficulty from easy to normal or hard.

Successfully completing missions earns you both experience and some cash you can spend on getting new ordnance. Like Payday, these are randomized drops, meaning you may not get that scope or underbarrel attachment you really want. Dambusters hopes this randomized loot system encourages players to keep coming back to land that elusive weapon or attachment, though it may also frustrate players who just want to buy it.

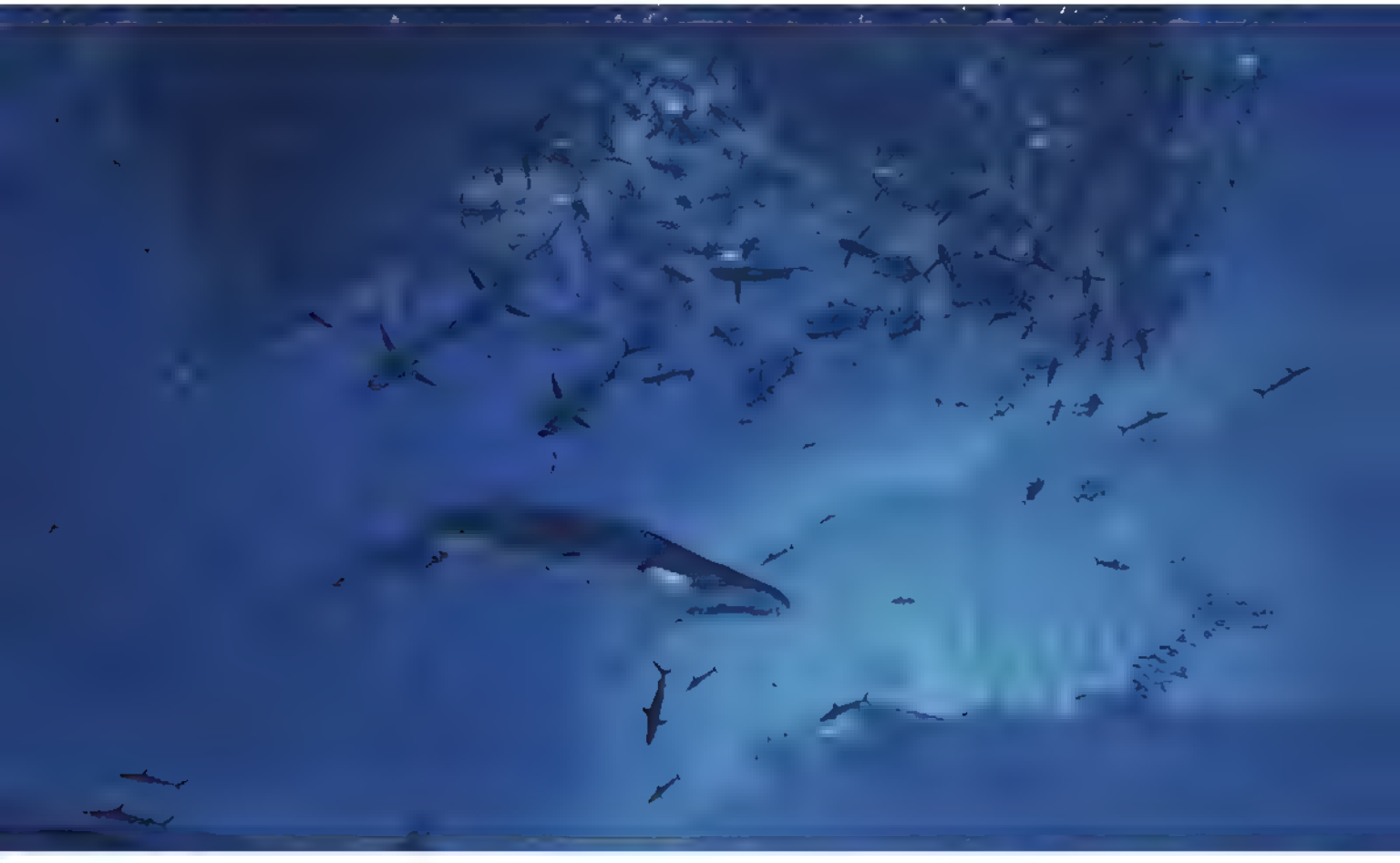
Homefront: The Revolution only ships with 12 cooperative Resistance missions, but Dambusters plans to add another 20 plus some new loot for free after the game launches, all of which fits alongside the complete single-player campaign about a Philadelphia resistance leader

Given its focus on creating interesting open-world combat scenarios, Homefront's Resistance mode seems like a smart way for Deep Silver to offer additional content. The big question looming, however, is how interested players will be in replaying missions that don't change much other than the difficulty as they wait for the new content. We'll find out when The Revolution begins on May 17

» Matt Bertz



Staying out of sight and coordinating your attacks is the best way to succeed in Resistance Mode



Abzû

Exploring the mysteries of the deep

Platform
PlayStation 4 • PC

Style
1-Player Action

Publisher
505 Games

Developer
Giant Squid

Release
June

When I first played Abzû almost a year ago, I was introduced to its concept and acclimated to moving underwater in the general ecosystem that developer Giant Squid had created. Our recent hands-on with the latest build of the game, however, is just as intriguing of an introduction to its aquatic world. The studio has subtly refined parts of the experience to make it more inviting while also deepening the mysteries at its heart.

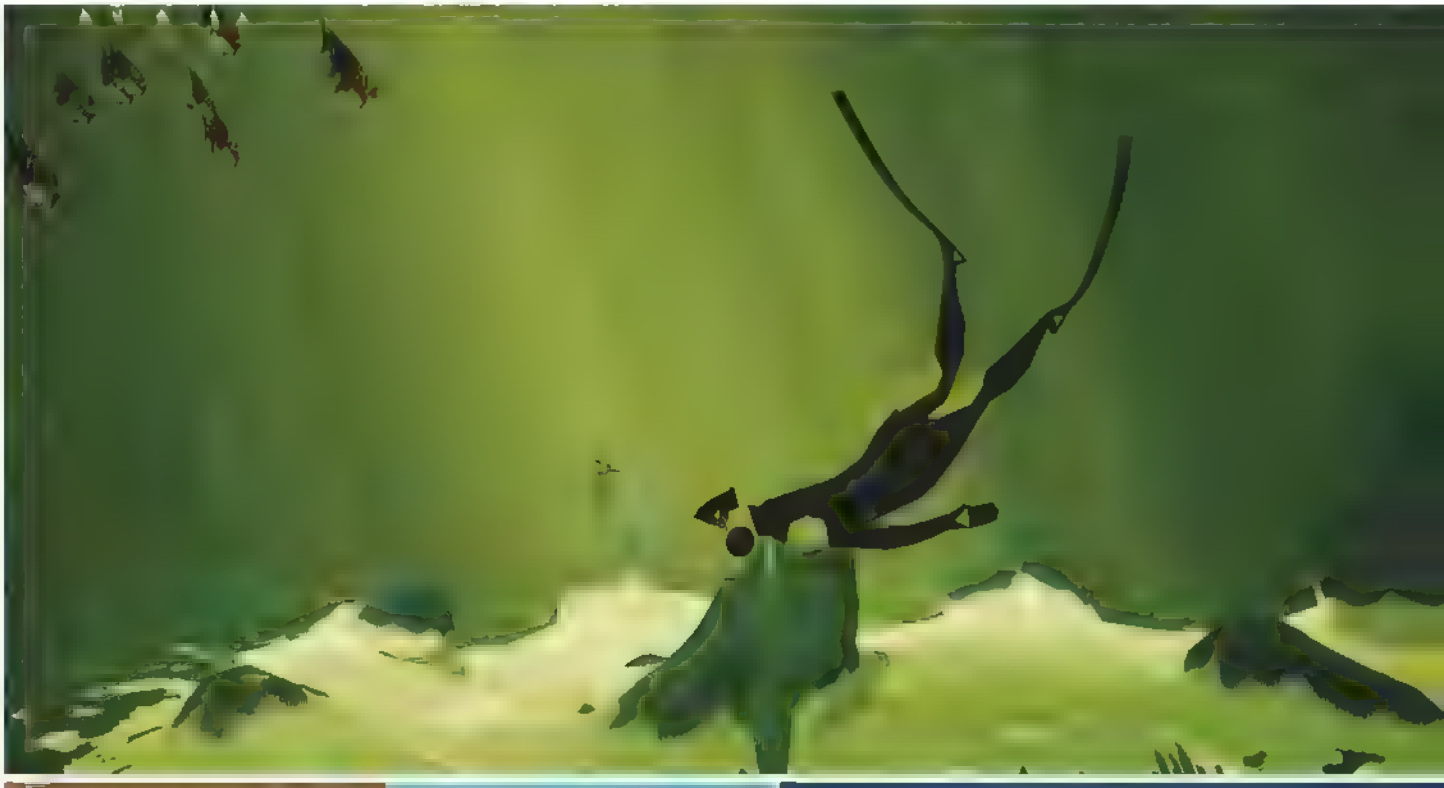
The first thing that strikes me is how natural it feels to move through the water and among the sea life. I hadn't played the game since E3, but it's easy to simply pick up the controller and swim around. I can now send out a sonar chirp when near fish to attract them and charge up my ability to boost forward while swimming, the capacity for which increases as the game progresses. "We added those mechanics to make players more excited to explore, because that's really the goal," says creator Matt Nava.

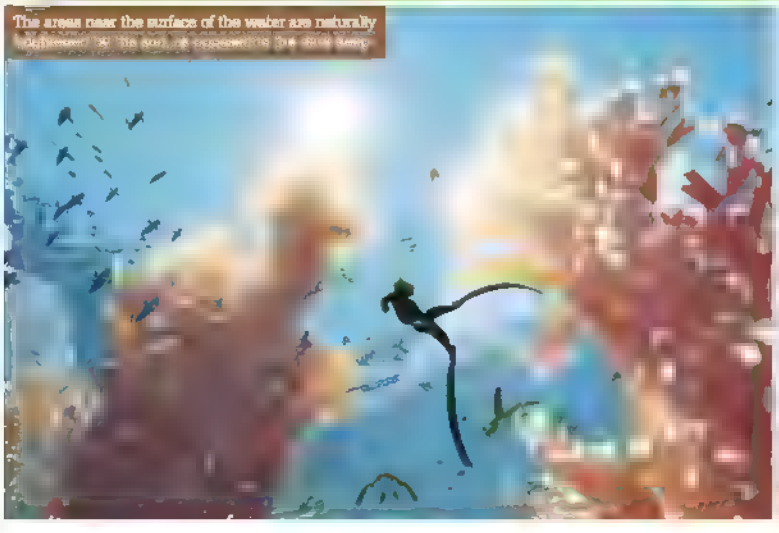
The new boost alone isn't what makes me want to explore. The movements of the animals themselves silently beckon. Grabbing on to them and hitching a ride is a simple mechanic that brings a rush of empathy. Their presence is amplified by a little extra visual sheen since I last played the game. Even when tens of thousands of fish converge into a whirling bait ball being torn apart by darting predators, Abzû looks amazing. The bait ball – whereby schools of smaller prey fish instinctively swarm together in a swirling ball to visually confuse predators and provide safety in numbers – is a phenomenon that speaks to the splendor and vibrancy of the world. I can swim within the bait ball but it also moves according to its own rhythm. I'm curious if any gameplay is attached to the ball, but for the moment it's simply an example of the dynamism of the environment.

Abzû's challenge is to strike that balance between encouraging freeform exploration but also making sure players progress. I have no problem with that in the build; I'm happy to wander around the opening areas, taking it all in and moving on when I'm ready. Currently the game has a simple 3D map players can bring up at any time to see the general direction of objectives, but the team isn't sure what form it will take in the final build. However, during my time with the game I only consult it once or twice.

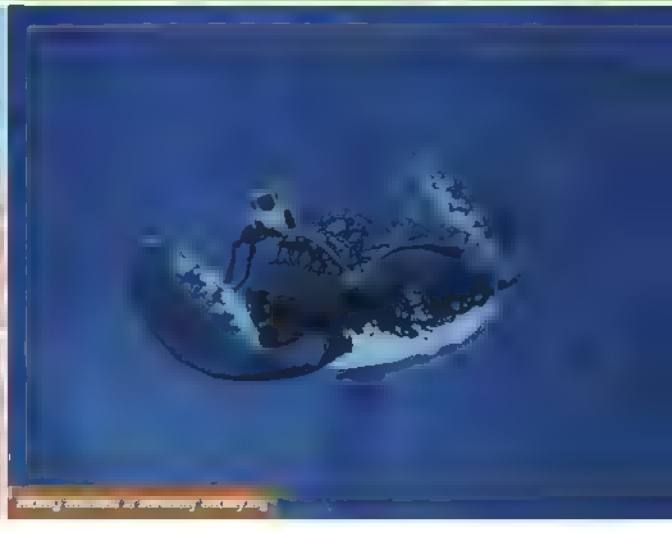
I find and dig up a few drones down on the sandy sea bed. They come online, scanning and recognizing something in my face, which activates their dormant programming. Following me around, they dig up some sand bars and drain resource pools with telescopic tentacles, further charging my boost reserves and leading me into new areas.

Each region feels different than the last, some with all new creatures, colors, music, and the heightened expectation of the journey still ahead. One underwater cavern opens up to reveal an impressive seascape teeming with life and masses of coral. Swimming around, I find an opening to a partially concealed area that Nava tells me will contain secrets when the game releases. For now I move on,





The areas near the surface of the water are naturally



joining a school of fish riding a current out to parts unknown.

Despite the vastness of the sea, Abzû is not an open-world game. Instead, it aims to encourage exploration and convey the enormity of the ocean but avoid players getting lost or the need to backtrack. "We want the player to explore a specific area and feel free to do that," Nava says. "Once they finish that area and go on to the next one, then they don't have to think about it anymore. They can keep going forward." The area I just left contained other currents to different locations, but in the end, the developer wants players to experience a linear story.

Even in these early sections of the game, my curiosity about larger events is piqued. I start off floating seemingly lifeless in calm waters, the sky a vista above. It's a different perspective to what I imagine will be a majority of my time spent underwater. Upon diving below it's not long before I encounter architectural remnants of some previous civilization. More than just sunken structures reclaimed by the water, these are arches and columns integrated directly into the coral and sea bed. I even come across carved busts of sharks. Were these meant to be worshiped? I can interact with them, but Nava doesn't reveal their function. In another area I use the drones to clear away sand from a wall of hieroglyphics. Unfortunately, I can't decipher the meaning of the scene.

Perhaps the most intriguing part of my experience with the game, however, is not my questions about who built the structures, but rather my interactions with the sea creatures. Later in the demo I come across a blue whale slowly making its way down into the depths, singing a lonely song. I'm immediately drawn to the impressive mammal, and as I grab onto it we plunge into the alien surroundings.

Later, I'm near the bottom of the ocean, which is an inhospitable environment and home to very specialized species evolved to survive the pressure, temperatures, and thermal vents. The entire level is cast in a murky reddish hue; the frolicking near the placid surface is now a distant world. Down here, Abzû's adventure is just beginning. "There's a lot of secrets we're hiding down there," Nava says. "A lot of things that are going to surprise in the second and third acts."

» Matthew Kato

Battleborn

Two more disparate heroes join the fight

» Platform
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

» Style
1 or 2-Player Action
(10-Player Online)

» Publisher
2K Games

» Developer
Gearbox Software

» Release
May 3

Gearbox has been counting down to Battleborn's release with a steady stream of character reveals from its enormous roster of heroes. With launch date looming just months away, we've finally reached the last two fighters of the game's 25-character crew: Kleese, a cantankerous science officer who comes off like a deranged Professor X, and El Dragón, a beefy luchador with massive mechanical arms. As you might guess, Kleese and El Dragón are on opposite ends of Battleborn's loony spectrum, both in appearance and play style.

A member of the support class, Kleese's frail, geriatric figure is bolstered by his "tactical battle chair," which allows him to aid his teammates by deploying energy rifts. These stationary energy fields replenish the shields of nearby allies while simultaneously damaging opponents, and can be a major boon to your team during standoffs and boss fights.

Like every character, Kleese has several unique attacks at his disposal. Kleese's wrist cannon can down foes from a distance, while his chair's shock taser dispatches melee opponents. These attacks feel underpowered compared to other heroes, but his energy mortar compensates by bombarding a target area in a volley of explosive orbs. Kleese's ultimate ability unleashes a black hole that draws in enemies and deals massive damage. Despite these attacks, Kleese fares better on the periphery of the battlefield, engaging isolated foes and assisting teammates when necessary; getting caught out in the open often ends in death.

El Dragón, on the other hand, thrives in the thick of battle. The earnest luchador packs an assortment of wrestling-based melee attacks, and can string together endless combos of punches with the primary attack button. However, the hero's true strength lies in his abilities. El Dragón's clothesline ability sends him dashing across the battlefield, smacking any foes that can't escape his outstretched arms. The attack is great for closing the gap on distant enemies, and can be upgraded to slow them on contact and leech their health.

The Dragon Splash ability is just as effective, launching the wrestler into the air before slamming him down in a powerful area-of-effect attack that stuns opponents. El Dragón's En Fuego ultimate unleashes an explosive shockwave and augments all of his other abilities. Going up against minigunners and rocket launchers with punches and body slams may sound risky, but each of El Dragón's attacks takes meaty chunks off of his enemies' health bars, making him a fun pick for offensive-minded players.

Battleborn's character roster continues to impress, but our reservations about the campaign remain. Gearbox is hoping Battleborn's story, character variety, and loot system will motivate players to keep replaying missions, similar to World of Warcraft's raids. But while the missions we played had their fun moments, formulaic objectives like protracted escort missions and horde-mode-style standoffs against waves of enemies left us eager to move onto other modes. We'll have to wait until launch to see if saving the last star in the universe is worth the fight.

» Jeff Marchiafava

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Mutants In Manhattan

Bayonetta's creators tackle mutant co-op turtle action

Platinum Games is renowned for its well-crafted action and smooth gameplay. Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles seems like a good fit for the type of over-the-top third-person action Platinum has built its reputation on, so we went hands-on to see if the relationship works as well as we hope.

Mutants In Manhattan is not an arena fighter, nor a beat 'em up with the turtles moving through a linear world pausing to rough up unlucky members of the Foot Clan. Instead, each level is a large, open area filled with randomized missions that must be completed in order to build up strength to take on a boss at the end. Missions we tackled ranged from straightforward tasks like beating up a certain number of enemies, to more abstract jobs that involve standing on top of a big, round bag of stolen money and rolling it back to the bank while your brothers fend off enemies.

Combat and movement feel smooth, living up to Platinum's high standard of control. Fighting uses heavy and light attacks for assorted combos, but every turtle has dedicated special attacks on cooldowns that can be switched out between missions. Some of those abilities are exclusive to each turtle. Raphael can use a stealth ability to do a huge amount of damage, Leonardo can slow time, Donatello can revive everyone who has fallen at once, and Michelangelo can pull out pom-poms to start cheering, instantly refreshing everyone's special abilities.

It's also possible for two turtles to fire off a combo simultaneously in close proximity to activate a stylish animation for additional damage.

The special abilities encourage players to work together, and I found myself shouting things like, "Okay, I am ready for a combo," or demanding Donatello hurry up and revive everyone. Unfortunately, this sort of entertaining shouting must be done through a headset, as there are no plans for local split-screen co-op.

When playing by yourself, you can quickly switch between the turtle you are playing, with A.I. taking control of the three others.

In some ways the game adopts a pseudo-MOBA structure, with each time you play being a slightly different race to build up your character in time for the boss. I didn't expect this approach from a Platinum game, but moving through the city and beating up the Foot Clan feels great.

» Kyle Hilliard

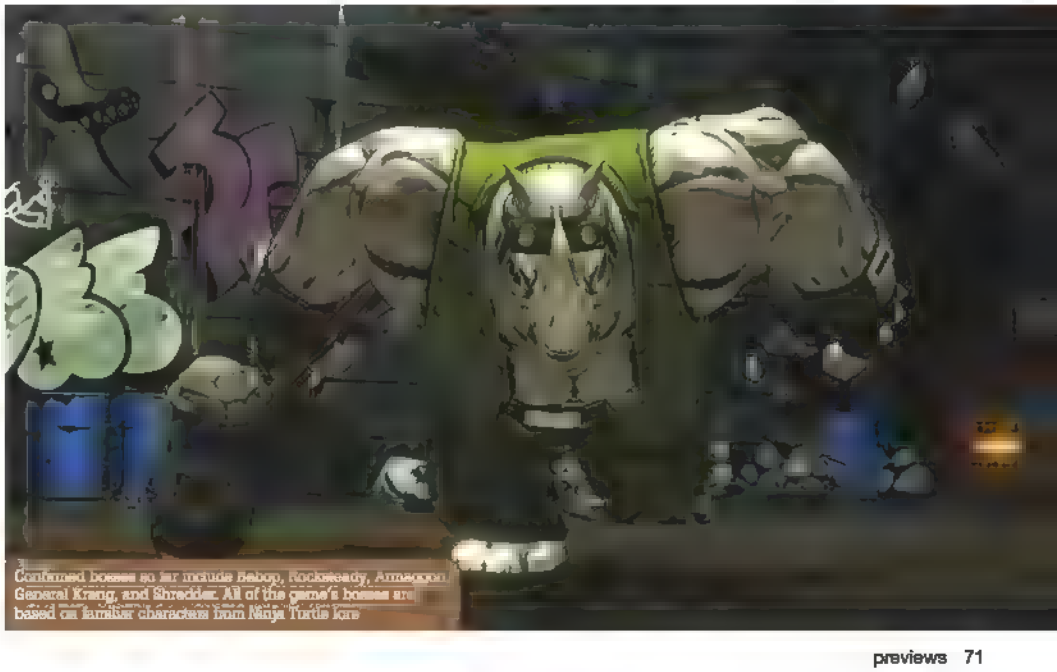
» [redacted]
PlayStation 4 • Xbox One
PlayStation 3 • Xbox 360
PC

» [redacted]
1-Player Action
(4-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Activision

» **Developer**
Platinum Games

» [redacted]
Summer



Confirmed bosses so far include Bebop, Rocksteady, Armaggon, General Krang, and Shredder. All of the game's bosses are based on familiar characters from Ninja Turtle lore.

Conan Exiles

Following in the barbarian's footsteps

PC

» **Style**
Online Multiplayer Action

Funcom

» **Developer**
Funcom Oslo

» **Release**
TBA

Robert E. Howard's original Conan fantasy stories not only created an action icon, they ushered in the modern era of fantasy fiction. Conan was a physical brute set wild in a dangerous world. Howard's vision for the hero was one man against the world. Funcom hopes to tap into those original survival themes with its upcoming online action game inspired by the current crop of survival crafting games, such as Minecraft and Day Z.

"We're big fans of the current crop of survival games," says executive producer Lawrence Poe, who previously worked on Funcom titles like The Secret World and Age of Conan. "Technology has finally progressed to a point where we can finally take that vision and apply it to Conan. The world of Hyboria is harsh. It's savage. It's definitely a fight for survival every day."

Players start the game on a cross in the middle of the wastelands. They've been exiled from their home kingdom and left to die. However, before becoming a feast for the birds, the bundle of testosterone named Conan walks over the ridge and sets them free. Conan tells players to follow in his footsteps, fight against the harsh wilds, and ultimately build a new country.

The surrounding kingdoms aren't keen on the idea that this band of ex-thieves and pickpockets are raising themselves up into a competing nation. As a result, from time to time, these nations send armies of solders into the wastes and attempt to kick players' teeth back into the dirt. Events like this are called The Purge, and collecting resources to prepare for these assaults is one of the major gameplay loops in Conan Exiles.

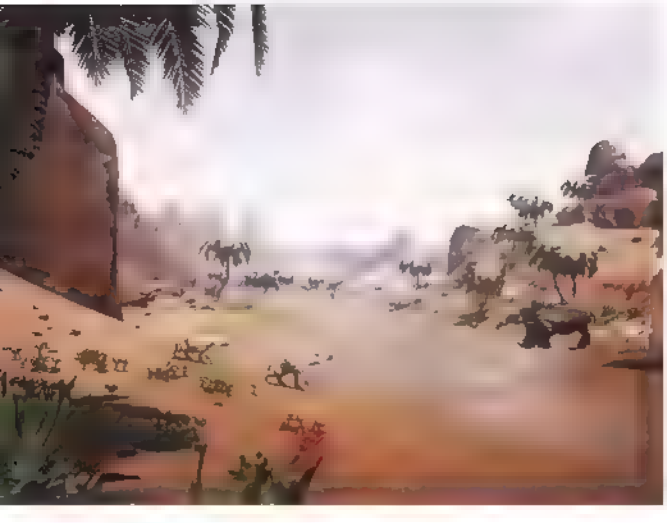
"We've spent a lot of time theorizing around what we call the day two problem," says creative director Joel Bylos. "Basically, once you figure out how to survive the first night in games like Minecraft, and you know how to build yourself a little fort away from the zombies, you hit the day two problem: You're either in the game because you love crafting things, or it's just not challenging anymore. We hope to distinguish ourselves with a more visceral combat system that brings you right into the moment-to-moment fighting."

Another way that Funcom hopes to set Conan Exiles apart from other survival games is through a religion system. Players choose which Hyborian god they worship, and this deity dictates their goals and adventures throughout the rest of the game. For example, if you align yourself with Set – an evil serpent god – snakes recognize you as an ally and never attack. Followers of Set also get special blessings if they sacrifice hearts on an altar to their god. The hearts of the followers of Mitra (one of Set's opposing gods) will result in more powerful blessings, which creates some natural tension between player factions.

Funcom is also considering how gods might encourage players to approach combat in different ways. For example, the Darfarians are cannibals who eat flesh, so they aren't allowed to cut their enemies with sharp weapons. They have to beat people to death with clubs to make sure their meat stays tender. If players choose, they can forsake the gods altogether, but each god's limitations/rewards help add diversity to Conan Exile's combat and survival systems.

Funcom will be setting up an assortment of official servers for players to jump into the same virtual worlds, but fans can also set up their own servers and play the game as if it were a single-player experience. Conan Exiles doesn't have an official release date yet, but would-be conquerors looking to test their survival skills can jump into the open beta later this summer on PC, and can expect the full release on both PC and unspecified consoles after that.

» **Ben Reeves**



Heroes Of the Storm

Overwatch joins the Blizzard brawl

This April, Tracer joins the cast of Heroes of the Storm as the first Overwatch character, adding a new franchise to the motley assortment of heroes heralding from the Warcraft, StarCraft, and Diablo franchises. Like the crazy two-player controlled Cho'gall and behind-the-scenes Abathur, Tracer comes with unique mechanics that make her a character all her own, and as accurate as possible to her speedy, shooty Overwatch counterpart. In true FPS fashion, Tracer can attack while moving, does away with the mana bar for an ammo/reload mechanic, and brings all of her cool abilities from Overwatch to a different play environment.

Tracer is a mobile, ranged assassin that can be built out with her talents to become a glass cannon, persistent poker, or crowd control specialist. Tracer's talents allow players to build her in a variety of ways with things like leeching rounds or a focus on melee punishment, but any way you play you're going to be reliving some of those epic Overwatch moments where Tracer can triple-blink into an engagement, drop off a devastating pulse bomb and fire off some rounds, and then recall through time back to safety before the opponents can even react.

Tracer comes with an almost identical kit from her Overwatch self, with a fast-firing gun-and-go playstyle that can triple-blink around the field, a time-recall that ports her three seconds back in the past, and a melee attack for close engagements.

It wouldn't be Tracer without her signature pulse-bomb attack, and that's included as her ultimate ability. Unlike other characters, Tracer can start using her ultimate at level one, and instead of acquiring an ultimate at level 10, she gains the ability to refine her pulse bomb with increased radius and a slow effect, a boost in single-target damage at the cost of area-of-effect, or extended range and easier charging.

As new heroes continually roll out to the Nexus with their unique kits, Blizzard will also be bringing Arena mode online sometime this year, where players can enjoy more relaxed, fun-oriented game modes. Arena mode was shown briefly at BlizzCon last year. The game mode is extremely fast-paced with a single objective and almost instant respawn times with games only lasting a few minutes. The concept behind the mode moving forward is something akin to Hearthstone's Tavern Brawl – a potential testing ground for all kinds of crazy game modes and off-the-wall playstyles that can sit side by side with the standard competitive matches. We'll see how things actually play out for Blizzard's evolving MOBA later this year. » **Daniel Tack**

[redacted]
PC • Mac

» **Style**
1 to 10-Player Multiplayer Online Battle Arena

» **Publisher**
Blizzard Entertainment

» **Developer**
Blizzard Entertainment

» [redacted]
April 2016

No mana bar here. Tracer uses energy to fuel her rapid-fire playstyle

MLB The Show 16

Pushing for another strong outing

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
PlayStation 3

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Sports
(2-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Sony Computer Entertainment

» **Developer**
SCE San Diego Studio

» **Release**
March 29

When athletes talk about the process of making a crucial play, they often allude to things moving in slow motion as the big moment happens. In MLB The Show 16, SCE San Diego allows you to replicate that feeling with ShowTime, a new mechanic that slows time during big junctures.

ShowTime affects modes where you control a single player like Road to the Show, kicking in automatically during plays that require lightning-fast reflexes. It also pops up during routine throws, making you use the right stick to guide the cursor to the target. If you want to go back to the way previous games play, you can disable ShowTime in the menus. Batters can also slow down one pitch per game, while pitchers can do it during a small handful of pitches each game.

In Road to the Show, you can equip perks to give bonuses like making your opponents perform more errors or guaranteeing that pitches you face are in the strike zone. These perks unlock based on your player's ratings. Equipping perks reduces your on-demand ShowTime, so these bonuses come at a cost.

Road to the Show now kicks off with a new scouting day that affects your player's draft stock based on your performance. Fans of franchise mode have new GM goals to complete in order to move up to a bigger market or avoid getting fired, as well as more accurate player ratings using the 20-80 scale real scouts use to evaluate players.

Individual morale now plays a part in how a player performs in franchise, with factors like role, contract, region, and performance contributing to their happiness. If a star player is unhappy, not only are they unlikely to re-sign, but it can also hinder performance

The Diamond Dynasty player card collection mode is adding challenges that reward you for using a diverse range of your cards. Dynamic card ratings are based on real-life player performance and different cards represent rookie and prime versions of players.

Diamond Dynasty is also implementing two new modes: Conquest and Battle Royale. Conquest is a single-player turn-based strategy mode designed to let you play Diamond Dynasty without having to compete online. It tasks you with expanding your team's fan base across a massive gridded map of the United States, while encroaching on the territories of A.I. teams. In order to gain more fans and spread your influence, you must defeat rival teams. Battle Royale lets you draft a competitive team of players to compete in an online tournament. Through Battle Royale, you can earn some of the best cards in the game.

Those who had difficulty hitting in past entries will appreciate the new batting camera and increased ball size which helps with perception of pitch speed, location, and break. In my time batting, I noticed an increase in my ability to differentiate balls and strikes.

Annualized sports games are constantly criticized for not making sweeping changes to justify the purchase every year. With new gameplay and a bevy of new modes, the developers behind MLB The Show 16 appear determined to make their game feel like more than just a roster update.

» **Brian Shea**

The Power Of PS4

Though MLB The Show 16 is still releasing on PlayStation 3, only PS4 players can enjoy certain features like retractable roofs on some stadiums and being able to jump directly into the next game of a series without any loading screens or returning to the menus.

New Hot Shots Golf [Working Title]

The venerable golf series changes with the times

Golf is in full swing these days, from The Golf Club on PC to the upcoming Burnout-esque Dangerous Golf, but it wouldn't be right for the public not to have a Hot Shots Golf game as well. Thankfully series developer Clap Hanz Ltd. is readying the franchise's PS4 debut, which currently has the working title of New Hot Shots Golf.

While the standard three-click gameplay still applies, the franchise is moving into new territory by letting players upgrade their golfer instead of the tradition of switching among various golfers with different abilities. "We made a conscious decision to develop a new system of leveling up characters to inspire a new lifestyle for Hot Shot golfers," says senior producer Nobuki Nagai. Players complete objectives to level up and customize their golfers, including tweaking their voice, apparel, accessories, facial features, and more.

Breaking precedent, the new Hot Shots also lets you roam around the courses and even do activities like golf-cart racing and fishing. While walking around you can spontaneously invite others on the course to a round of golf. One of the new online modes is capture the flag, where teams of three try to complete the most holes in the shortest time. This mode also includes the game's newfound spirit of freedom, so you can run around in the background while someone's trying to tee off.

The Hot Shots franchise has codified its gameplay and look, nailing down what the franchise does best. This time, however, developer Clap Hanz is using that as a jumping-off point for an experience that uses the power of the PS4 to take the series into new territory. The game doesn't have a U.S. release date yet, but it will be out in Japan in 2016. » **Matthew Kato**

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4

» **[redacted]**
1 to 4-Player Sports (6-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Sony Computer Entertainment

» **Developer**
Clap Hanz Ltd.

» **[redacted]**
TBA

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Ace Combat 7

Heading back into the clouds

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4

» **Style**
1-Player Action
(Multiplayer TBA)

» **Publisher**
Bandai Namco

» **Developer**
Project Aces/
Bandai Namco

» **Release**
TBA

After a long absence, Project Aces recently revealed plans to bring the Ace Combat franchise to the PS4 for the first time. An enigmatic trailer helped to announce the project, but we've been flying blind regarding any concrete details. We asked director Kazutoki Kono to outline what we can expect from the return of the long-running series.

"Since Ace Combat 7 is the next true sequel to the franchise, our goal is to develop a game that takes Ace Combat to new heights," Kono says. "We aim to give players more opportunity to make strategic and tactical decisions." His mention of heights isn't figurative. A big focus for the new game is high-altitude conflicts, with a particular focus on dynamic aerial topography.

That topography is detailed via a two-layer map. As expected, players can see the ground geography, but in addition they can also view a cloud map overlaid on top. Clouds factor prominently in the strategic features of Ace Combat 7, allowing pilots to use cloud cover against their enemies. "There exist various kinds of clouds, such as cloud groupings that have intense air currents inside, or dark clouds which will obscure outward visibility for pilots," Kono says. Tapping into the capabilities of the PS4, Project Aces is also implementing an aerial battlefield that changes over time, such as dynamic weather effects.

One of the central ideas explored in Ace Combat 7's story is the growing use of drones in aerial warfare, and the conflicts that arise between manned and unmanned aircraft. Kono has also expressed an eagerness to confront "the collision between the powers of the military," but stops short of offering specific details. Previous games in the series often tackle similarly weighty themes surrounding the trauma and stress faced by military personnel, and we fully anticipate some social commentary to go along with the dogfights. Kono asserts that the new game once again takes place in an alternate real world, albeit with some fantastical elements that aren't present (yet) in today's real-life military landscape.

One of the coolest of those fantastical elements is featured prominently in the initial trailer: an orbital elevator called the Lighthouse. We now know that its inclusion in that introduction is much more than a one-off nod. "The orbital elevator is the central symbol that makes up the core of the story," Kono says. A pilot is assigned to protect the Lighthouse from attack, and that mission plays a key role in both the plot and gameplay.

One of the most exciting features coming to Ace Combat 7 is the support of PlayStation VR. "We are still deciding exactly how the PlayStation VR functions will appear in the game," Kono says. "But we need to develop VR functions while solving potential obstacles that come with designing a VR experience. For example, we need to consider issues related to motion sickness." Regardless, the team's chief goal with its approach to VR is to help a player feel like they're inside the cockpit and piloting a plane. As PS VR comes closer to release, a good Ace Combat experience could go a long way to selling the device's potential.

The specifics of Ace Combat 7's combat gameplay innovations remain scarce, but Bandai Namco plans to include a multiplayer component, and is exploring opportunities to partner up with flight-stick manufacturers, a functionality that added a lot of excitement to the gameplay in earlier console generations.

» **Matt Miller**

Warhammer 40,000: Eternal Crusade

Massively multiplayer shooting and sci-fi

The Warhammer IP is everywhere these days, spanning genres and gamestyles from tactical fare to co-operative first-person shooters. Behaviour Interactive's take on Space Marines and third-person shooting is a massive affair, with players sizing up with four iconic factions before getting out into the world and trying to conquer it. While this sounds like the basis of an MMORPG, things are more rooted in the moment-to-moment action, which forms the core of the eternal conflict in the giant world of Arkhona.

While much of the allure of the lobby-based shooter is already present, as the title moves toward release, new components are coming into play, including persistent-universe elements, loads of faction-specific vehicles, and territory conquest. Factions (Space Marines, Chaos Space Marines, Eldar, and Orks) participate against each other, competing for global objectives on the "big board" map in quest-style fare that takes around two weeks to complete.

This all falls under the shadow of the "PvE" faction of the game, the dinosaur-esque Tyranids. While players can't join the Tyranids, it has significant effects on the sidelines, as they're ready to interfere with territory acquisition and objectives between various factions vying for power. Players can even team up for 5-person co-op encounters against the Tyranids.

Combat is currently limited to 20 vs 20 Outpost encounters, but the goal is to move that toward real global combat with hundreds of participants in a given encounter. Players can certainly play the game solo, but it's a much better idea to "squad up" and work as a team to conquer objectives for the best results, both for yourself and for your faction. "We might have 20 vs 20 now but moving over time and as new tech becomes available the matches will grow," says executive producer Nathan Richardsson, "It won't be just 100 or 200 laying siege to a Fortress either. We're talking warfare on a global scale."

Richardsson also understands the many game comparisons that will come about when trying to describe the game. "Whether Planetside 2, Destiny, Defiance, or Battlefield comes to mind, you're right in all cases," Richardsson says. "We, as many other games, are a hybrid chasing our own idea of fun. We think massive online shooter describes that well."

Behaviour plans to have free expansions every three months post launch and won't have a pay-to-win in-game store. "The best gear is only available through play," Richardsson says. "Our strategy is that what we have in the store is something players really, really, really want but don't ever need. Like real life." ▪ **Daniel Tack**

- **Platform**
  PlayStation 4
  Xbox One • PC • Mac
- **Style**
  Massively Multiplayer Online Shooter
- **Publisher**
  Bandai Namco
- **Developer**
  Behaviour Interactive
- **Release**
  2016

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Final Fantasy XV

Entering the home stretch

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Square Enix

» **Developer**
Square Enix

» **Release**
2016

The long history of Final Fantasy XV (formerly Final Fantasy Versus XIII) is no secret, but unlike its early years of development, fans can't rightfully question whether or not the team is making progress on the title. From last year's Episode Duscae demo to the March upcoming event (at which Square Enix plans to announce a firm release date), we no longer need to worry about an uncertain future for Final Fantasy XV. However, a recent trailer and presentation from director Hajime Tabata revealed we still have a lot to learn about this RPG.

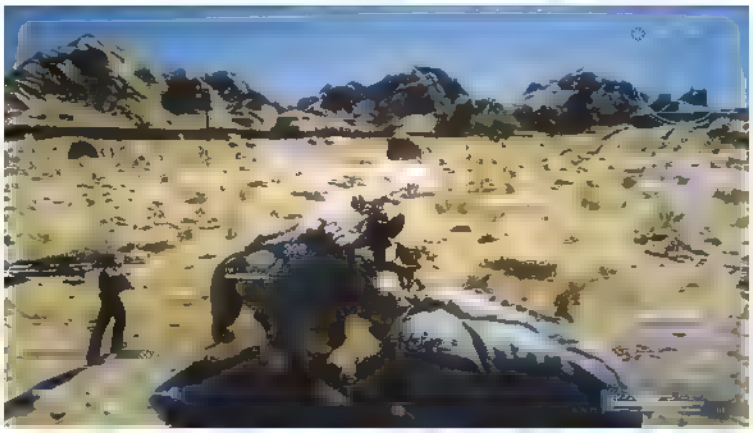
One of the biggest mysteries until now has been how magic functions, and Tabata took the opportunity during a January development update to explain the system's basics. Classic elemental spells like fire and blizzard return, but their effects reach beyond simply doing damage to enemies. For example, casting fire in a grassy field causes nearby plants to ignite and spread the blaze, creating a need for environmental awareness when casting. Weather effects can also impact your spells; rain extinguishes fire, but it amplifies the effects of the thunder spell.

How you use magic is also unconventional, apparently leaning more toward an item-based approach. "[The elements] are a type of energy that you gather," Tabata says. "So for magic, you gather the different types of elemental energy and use them to create magic. And the magic that you form from it is stored as an important part of your inventory. And you can equip that item in place of a weapon to use in battle."

In addition to elemental spells, players can also summon creatures (like Ramuh in Episode Duscae) and use a separate breed of magic tied to a royal ring. However, don't expect a huge catalogue of magic spells to sort through. "Our policy for magic was to make each individual spell have great meaning and purpose in the game," Tabata says. "So the design philosophy of going for quality over quantity applies equally to both elemental and ring magic."

The newest tidbits about Final Fantasy XV aren't solely about magic. Square Enix recently released a trailer that showcases a new area – one much different from the wide-open wilderness seen in Episode Duscae. The video shows Noctis and his companions infiltrating a confined military compound, which also demonstrates a new style of gameplay. This sequence seems focused on remaining undetected, with the party waiting for patrols to pass, taking cover behind objects, and performing stealth kills (though full battle appears to break out eventually). We have to wait to see how big a role this type of mission plays, along with other possible variations on the standard combat formula.

Tabata confirmed that Final Fantasy XV is approaching a phase where all of the content and systems are in place, leaving only polishing and fine-tuning left before release. We know that release will come sometime this year, but until then, we can look forward to more details as the final product takes shape. » **Joe Juba**



Tales Of Berseria

A story of betrayal and pirates

The long-running Tales franchise is trying to secure its place with a new generation of RPG fans While Bandai Namco has been rol-ing out plenty of entries, they've been incons stent. Hopefully, the next entry, Tales of Berseria, puts the beloved series on a steadier path.

Tales of Berseria centers on Velvet Crowe, the first exclusive female protagonist to grace the franchise Three years prior to the main quest, Velvet was betrayed by someone she thought she could trust. The conse-quences are big, as she loses what matters to her the most: her family A strange power also takes over her hand, transforming it into a cursed claw. The claw has the powerful ability to attack monsters, but it also has its mysteries and dangers. Another issue to solve? A weird plague is spread-ing through the land that's turning humans into monsters.

Fans of the series know every game has a theme, and Berseria focuses on the conflict between emotion and reason. Set in the Midgand Sacred Kingdom, Berseria shares the world "Waste and" w th the previous iteration, Zestiria, but occurs before Zestiria's events. The area contains countless islands, so in this entry you live the life of a pirate, and it's heavily focused on sailing and shipbuild ng.

Not much has been revealed about the action battle system yet, except that it will be similar to Zestiria's, fea-turing free-run character control, free camera control, and spec al attacks (artes) set to the face buttons

Many intriguing things are at play, especially sailing your own ship and making discoveries like a pirate. Tales of Berseria has been confirmed for North America, but no release date has been set. Time wil tell if taking to the seas proves more exciting than previous recent entries.

» Kimberley Wallace

[redacted]
PlayStation 4 • PC

» **Style**
1 to 4-Player
Action/Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Bandai Namco

» **Developer**
Bandai Namco

» **Release**
TBA

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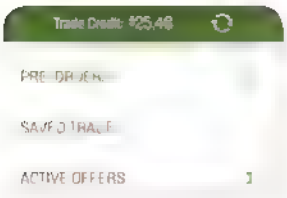

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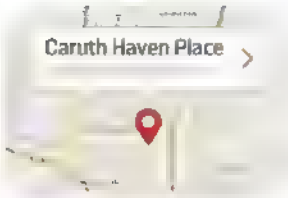

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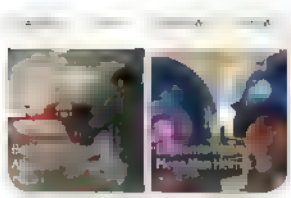

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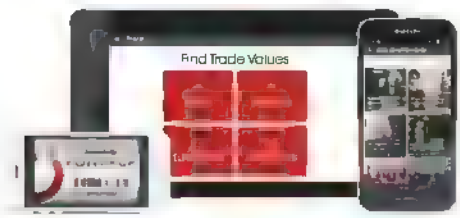

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GameStop
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game informer GAME OF THE MONTH

90 XCOM 2

We lost a lot of good soldiers while playing Firaxis' XCOM revival back in 2012, but those alien firefights against invading alien forces were so compelling that we couldn't put the game down. For the sequel, Firaxis has polished nearly every aspect of its formula. Set decades in the future, after the aliens have occupied our planet, you must spearhead the resistance movement. Your soldiers have new skills and weapons, but the aliens have an assortment of new tricks as well. Manage a tight supply of resources as you race around the world – jumping from shadow to shadow – in this unending struggle for the fate of humanity. Turn to page 86 to find out why XCOM 2 is every bit as exciting as the games that have come before it.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.
5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
1	Horizon Games: Unification.

AWARDS

game informer PLATINUM	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
game informer GOLD	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
game informer SILVER	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
game informer GAME OF THE MONTH	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

For more information on the age classification ratings in our reviews, head to gameinformer.com/ratings

HOW FAR WILL YOU TAKE IT
THE ALL-NEW RAV

Far Cry Primal

Moving forward by looking back

8.75

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
Take Far Cry to the Mesozoic era, swapping guns and vehicles for clubs and tamed animals

» **Graphics**
Oros is a beautiful place to explore, and its inhabitants are impressively rendered

» **Sound**
Ubisoft Montreal made the bold (and effective) decision to keep all the dialogue in a primitive spoken language

» **Playability**
Controlling your hunter on foot is simple and precise, and riding a mammoth handles about as well as you'd expect

» **Entertainment**
Players who associate Far Cry with explosions and massive gunfights might find the setting disappointing, but it's one of my favorite entries in the series yet

» **Replay Value**
Moderately high

game informer SILVER

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Ubisoft **Developer** Ubisoft Montreal **Release** February 23 **Rating** M

At its core, Far Cry is a series that drops players into a beautiful setting, gives them tools to survive, and then lets them loose. That's been true whether you're on the sands of a tropical island, hurtling down dirt roads on a jeep in Africa, or staying warm against the chill of a Himalayan snowstorm. Far Cry Primal has its own setting, but it marks the most drastic change of venues that Ubisoft Montreal has concocted so far – including the '80s nostalgia-play expansion for Far Cry 3, Blood Dragon. It's a gamble that pays off, providing some of the best immersive action that the series has to offer.

You play as Takkar, a warrior who is separated from his tribe after a mammoth hunt ends in disaster. He heads to Oros, a lush and bountiful landscape where he meets a fledgling tribe of hunter-gatherers called the Wenja. They're not alone, however, facing threats from the fire-wielding Izila and the brutish Udam. It's up to you to tap into Takkar's innate skills as a hunter to build the Wenja's settlement and fend off their attackers.

The slim narrative setup works in Primal's favor, creating an entry where, for the first time in the series, I didn't feel guilty wandering around instead of zeroing in on rescuing my kidnapped friends or liberating a nation. You're certainly trying to make Oros a peaceful place for your tribe to flourish, but gathering resources and hunting is as valuable to the cause thematically – and mechanically – as is maintaining the story missions.

Don't expect any time-travel shenanigans; Takkar doesn't stumble upon a crate filled with firearms or other highly anachronistic cheats. His arsenal is era-appropriate, consisting of upgradable clubs, spears, and bows that you craft by scouring the world for materials. It's bound to burn out players who enjoy driving C4-laden trucks at outposts in the other Far Cry games, but I didn't miss the comparative lack of explosive action. My favorite Far Cry moments center on the feeling of hiding in the brush, armed with a bow as I size up a cluster of enemies or a base. That's still here, even if your arrows don't have aluminum shafts.

Primal makes up for a lack of modern tech with Takkar's Beast Master abilities. He can tame a wide variety of creatures, from badgers to massive cave bears, and have them fight by his side. Each has its own strengths and weaknesses, but they're all helpful when raiding enemy camps. As you move the story along and grow your settlement, you attract new villagers who teach you how to use additional weapons like bee-filled bombs, mind-altering berserker shards, and eventually fire-bombs. I missed my trusty binoculars, but I learned to take advantage of my trusty owl, who could not only scout out an outpost before I hit it, but could also soften it up by dropping deadly payloads on my behalf. The series' so-called anecdote factory is still humming right along, even if some of its more familiar machines aren't running.

Far Cry has had its share of memorable villains over the years, such as the maniacal Vaas and the honey-tongued psychopath Pagan Min. Primal's heavies aren't as memorable, but Takkar's friends make up for the lack of a singular antagonist. I saw unexpected moments of sweetness and poignancy mixed in with the skull-smashing violence, and I loved watching my tribe grow from a couple of survivors huddled into a cave to a vibrant community teeming with music and life.

Don't let the lack of a number fool you: This is a full Far Cry experience, with top-notch production and another massive open world to explore. The missions start to feel fairly similar after a while, usually requiring you to go to an area and grab something or kill everything. And even though you have access to a fairly robust toolbox, you can get through most of the situations by running headlong into battle, stabbing faces with your spear while your animal friend creates a diversion for you.

Still, this is the first entry in the franchise that seems to truly support the way I play these games. It always felt a little strange to be a warrior who rocks a polo shirt, and Primal lets me live out the caveman fantasies that I frankly never knew I'd been harboring.

» Jeff Cork

Street Fighter V

Restraining its true power

Style 1 or 2-Player Fighting (2-Player Online) **Publisher** Capcom **Developer** Capcom, Dimps **Release** February 16 **Rating** T

7.25

PS4 • PC

» **Concept**
Carry on the lauded legacy of the Street Fighter series with approachable gameplay, but without many of the features fans expect

» **Graphics**
Characters and backgrounds are detailed and vibrant, but the new designs of some fan-favorite fighters are jarring

» **Sound**
High-octane music gives a nice backdrop to fights, and personalized verbal jabs between fighters is a nice touch, but I would have liked more of them

» **Playability**
Combat is newcomer-friendly while maintaining its depth, making it fun whether you're just learning how to throw a hadouken or ready to dominate online

» **Entertainment**
Playing Street Fighter V is an outstanding experience, but the limited modes and infrastructure that binds them together stands on shaky ground

» **Replay Value**
High

As the flagship fighting franchise, Street Fighter strives to appeal to both die-hards and tourists. Street Fighter IV excelled in being fun for players of all levels, and Street Fighter V furthers those strides. However, the deeper I dove, the more my enthusiasm for the gameplay was overshadowed by the surprisingly shallow options.

Street Fighter V builds on the core mechanics that have kept the series at the forefront of the genre. Whether hurling fireballs or unleashing a double knee press to cap off a vicious combo, inputs are easier to pull off in the heat of battle, making bouts more about strategy than learning special moves. I rarely had difficulty throwing a dragon punch when I needed to – the focus is instead on situational awareness and knowing the correct response to your opponent's advances.

Adding to its sturdy foundation, Street Fighter V introduces a new V-system, increasing accessibility for less skilled players. The system gives new powerful abilities to each fighter without complicating their movesets since all of the commands are performed using the same basic inputs. Whether augmenting Ryu's moves with electricity or powering up Necalli's attacks, the V-Trigger system helped me even the odds against more skilled players.

Despite the increased approachability, the depth fans crave from the series prevails. Characters like Rashid and Necalli are built for up-close aggression, while defensive characters like Dhalsim and F.A.N.G. allow you to operate from a safer distance. When you combine characters' unique attributes and abilities with the V-System and the Critical Arts system (the new name for EX specials), building a strategy compatible with both your playstyle and the character's strengths is easy.

The gameplay may be a shining model for the genre, but how you engage with it is disappointing. Street Fighter V abandons the traditional arcade mode, so players who want the single-player experience are pushed toward story and survival modes. Story mode is a big letdown, as each character's scenario ends after only a few fights (with forgettable illustrations and narration in between). The mode is fleeting and inconsequential, particularly for characters like Chun-Li, who squares off against Vega for two of her three fights. A more traditional ladder experience is delivered in survival mode, but it feels soulless. You fight through the same rotation of characters capped off by a boss fight.

Combo challenges, the best way to learn how to chain together moves, are absent. It's a shame this feature is missing, particularly since characters control differently in this entry. However, training mode does add the awesome ability to program the A.I. dummy to perform a series of actions – a feature that would play fit nicely into training mode if it actually taught you how to effectively use the characters.

Taking on a friend never gets old, but you can't fight a CPU character in versus mode, meaning you have no way to stage a match against a particular A.I. character outside of training. This limits solo players' ability to play and learn the game, instead throwing them into the grinder of online competition. Street Fighter is known for its active online community, but players should be able to enter it on their own terms.

Though grueling, playing online is the most rewarding mode, as it allows you to truly put your skills to the test. I love the ranking system that allows you to build up to a new league and improve your global standing, and the flexibility of battle lounges is a big draw for players wanting to play with friends. Unfortunately, you can't select your fighter prior to each match in most online modes. Instead, you set your main in an external menu and automatically fight as that character, removing the classic process of two players choosing characters and squaring off. Street Fighter V also lacks spectator mode, which is a big deal for those who like watching others compete. These are both glaring (and confusing) omissions at launch.

The gameplay of Street Fighter V is stellar, and no matter what mode you play, the superb mechanics follow. Unfortunately, the content isn't substantial, and omits several standard offerings. It's a shame the structure presents so many frustrations, because the gameplay itself is entertaining.

» Brian Shea

More On The Way

The modes offered at launch are anemic, but Capcom is promising a ton of post-launch support, including a challenges mode shortly after launch and a CG story mode in a free update this summer. Even though a roadmap is in place, it's no excuse to release a game that feels so incomplete. At launch, Street Fighter V offers little to do outside of the online modes, which is a problem for the non-competitive fans.

Lego Marvel's Avengers

The Age of Loltron

7.75

Style 1 or 2-Player Action **Publisher** Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment **Developer** TT Games **Release** January 26 **Rating** E10+

PS4 • Xbox One • Wii U

» Concept
The second Marvel-based Lego game focuses on the Marvel Cinematic Universe and D-list comic book characters

» Graphics
The over-the-top action of Marvel's films is beautifully captured in brick form. TT Games also knocks the practice of sight gags out of the park

» Sound
Recycled music and voice work from the film are joined by new audio from Stan Lee (who is hilarious in this game), Clark Gregg (Agent Coulson), and Cobie Smulders (Maria Hill)

» Playability
Strikes a nice balance between puzzles and combat. The hero-specific tag-team moves are also nicely designed and fun to find

» Entertainment
A step down in terms of star power, but the humor and gameplay are entertaining

» Replay Value
High

New heroes and villains are introduced into Marvel's comic-book continuity almost every week. Iron Man periodically exchanges laser fire with new techno-villains, and different characters suit up as Captain America for a spell, but these story deviations from the core conflicts and characters rarely have lasting impact in the universe. Most of the new characters disappear into Marvel's expansive archives and are never heard of again. Some of those forgotten heroes find a home in Lego Marvel's Avengers.

On the surface, this is a video game adaptation of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. The game offers lengthy campaigns that recount all of *The Avengers* and *The Avengers: Age of Ultron*. Tucked off to the side are additional levels based on *Iron Man 3*, *Captain America: The First Avenger*, *Thor: The Dark World*, and *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*.

In all of these well-designed stages, The Hulk smashes up a storm, Iron Man's firepower is put to the test, Captain America's shield is used for puzzle solving, Thor sprays lightning all over the place, Black Widow hacks into computers, and Hawkeye pretends to be powerful. TT Games homes in on the excitement of the films and has fun with the stories, inserting banana and toilet-plunger jokes whenever possible. It's an enjoyable ride, and a great way to re-experience these films. Throughout the entire game, TT Games finds a nice balance between action and puzzles; Lego games often place too much emphasis on the puzzles and the time-consuming minigames tied to them. These levels flow nicely, look absolutely stunning, and don't stretch on for too long.

All of the levels are inspired by the motion pictures, but a deeper dive into the post-campaign content reveals most of the unlockable characters are completely divorced from the films. A good majority of these characters are blasts from The Avengers' past that even the most devout Marvel fans likely won't recognize. Another portion of the characters are deep cuts from the movies, such as *The Avengers'* Beth the Waitress, a playable hero who pours coffee.

Unlike Lego Marvel Super Heroes, you won't find any characters directly associated with Spider-Man, Fantastic Four, X-Men, or the *Guardians of the Galaxy* movie (outside of The Collector, who is brilliantly sewn into the collecting aspect of the game).

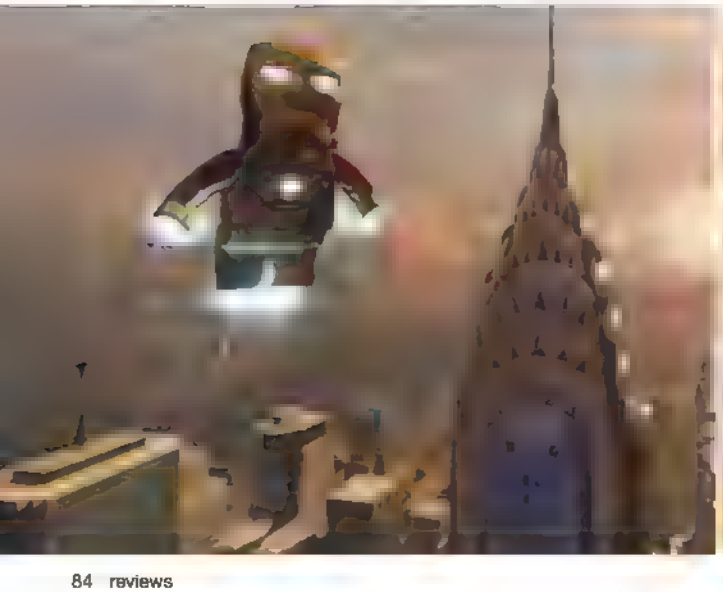
For every unlockable outfit for Captain America, you run into character oddities like Reptil, Butterball, Rescue, and Detroit Steel. I often had to hop online to visit Marvel's database to learn who these characters were. A character like Reptil last appeared in an issue of *Avengers Academy*, but only on p. 19. As much fun as it is to dive deep into what I would call Marvel's D-list characters, I didn't have that much fun controlling the majority of these characters. Few of them feel as fully fleshed out as the recognizable A-listers on the roster, and many have practically identical moves.

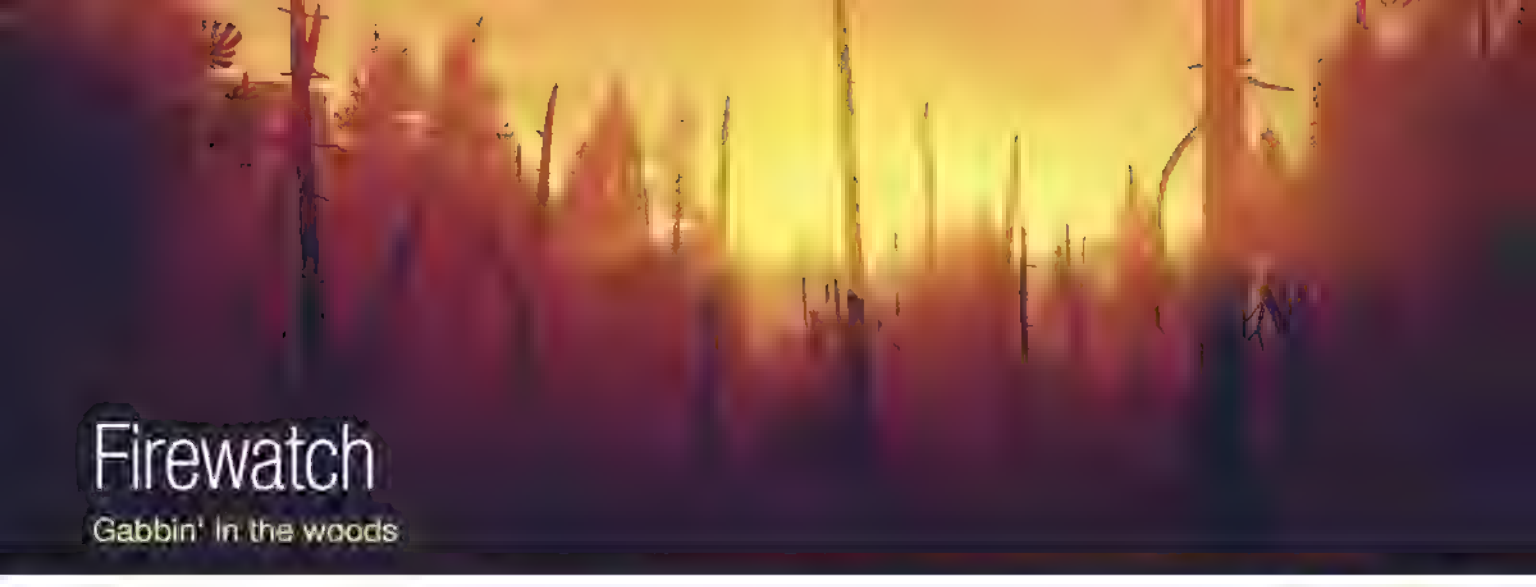
Given just how diverse the Marvel universe is, I find it odd that TT Games once again decided to use New York City as its overworld. Although the challenges within it are new, retreading familiar territory makes it feel like more of the same from Lego Marvel Super Heroes, including the ability to fly from the ground to an airborne S.H.I.E.L.D. helicarrier.

TT Games did a bang-up job with the challenges tied to gold bricks and unlocking characters. I love how Agent Carter's missions are told in a flashback style, and although there are a number of fetch quests to complete, most bring a unique strand of humor. There are plenty of big laughs, both in the campaign's story and the bonus side content.

Most Lego games are better played cooperatively with a friend, but Lego Marvel's Avengers periodically struggles to properly frame the action when two players occupy the world. In one stage, a necessary jump is hidden from view when both players are together. The only way to see it is to have the second player drop out, which changes the viewpoint.

Seeing how TT Games pokes fun at Marvel's films is worth the price of entry alone. The gameplay is also good, but it is a little rough around the edges. The biggest strike against it is the secret characters aren't as noteworthy as those in Lego Marvel Super Heroes. This Lego experience is more for comic fans who can appreciate seeing a character who hasn't appeared in anything since the 1950s. » Andrew Reiner





Firewatch

Gabbin' in the woods

Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** Campo Santo **Developer** Campo Santo **Release** February 9 **Rating** M

7.75

PS4 • PC • Mac

» Concept
Escape your troubled home life by working as a fire spotter in Wyoming, and become entwined in a complicated new relationship

» Graphics
The use of bold, flat colors doesn't diminish the natural beauty on display

» Sound
The voice actors do a remarkable job of fleshing out characters that don't get any real face time

» Playability
Coming up with your responses before a timer slowly ticks down is the most intense the action gets

» Entertainment
Fans of slow-burning stories will find much to appreciate here

» Replay Value
Moderately low

When Henry gets into his truck and heads from Colorado to Wyoming, he's looking to escape a marriage that's essentially just a wedding band worn out of habit. Opportunity comes in the form of a seasonal position as a firewatcher – sitting in a tower during the dry months and making sure the state park doesn't turn into kindling. Over the course of a few months, he (and the player) forms an intimate bond with his supervisor, a woman named Delilah whom Henry only interacts with via walkie-talkie. That relationship is forged and tested over several eerie events, though Firewatch is at its best during the story's quieter moments.

The summer begins with an encounter with some troublesome teens, and that interaction sets up weeks of paranoia and intrigue. Henry is free to roam around the woods, trails, and streams around his station – within reason. After all, he's on the clock, not vacation. He's accompanied in spirit by Delilah, whose own outpost only appears as a tiny speck on the horizon. Still, she's a constant companion thanks to Henry's ever-present radio. I was immediately drawn into the game's world, partly because of the power of its simple text intro, and also because of the novelty of taking part in something so mundane. We've all saved the world in games; I like the appeal of helping characters find redemption or some sense of peace.

Henry and Delilah start chatting when he first arrives, and it carries through the entirety of the story. She's been at the job for 13 years off and on, she tells him, and she's able to provide context for all the new things he's seeing. It manifests itself in the game in a simple and elegant way – when players focus onto an object worth talking about, they can have Henry radio Delilah and talk. That can be something mundane like getting stung by a bee, or reporting a menacing figure lurking around at night. Conversations are fluid and interesting, and they can take different turns depending on how you choose to react.

Campo Santo's debut game is devoid of action in any traditional sense, putting it in the company of games such as Gone Home or Everybody's Gone to the Rapture. These kinds of games all too often end up making the player character a weirdo monologist or voyeur, which is something Firewatch skillfully avoids by including interactive dialogue. It's a simple addition, but it breathes life into the game. Thanks to the excellent work of Rich Sommer *(Mad Men)* and Cissy Jones, the conversations have a flow that feels natural and engaging, rather than the stilted recitations that multiple-choice dialogue often yields. Both characters are lonely in their own ways, and learning more about these complicated people is the highlight.

Firewatch is set in the late '80s after a massive wildfire wreaked havoc in Yellowstone, but it thankfully doesn't lean heavily on cheap nostalgia. President Reagan is mentioned in cassette tapes, but the era is just a subtle backdrop. Talk focuses primarily on relationships and memories of people who have worked at the park over the years. Your decisions, both in conversations and action, pay off in small but interesting ways, which I appreciated. Your explorations can lead to things like a new pet or hearing a ridiculous ghost story, so it's worth pushing around the boundaries to see what happens.

The dialogue and characterization is so natural that some of the events near the end are tonally jarring. Without saying too much, things aren't what they appear to be at first, showing what can happen when people talk themselves over a dramatic cliff. At the same time, the resolution reminds me of an episode of Scooby-Doo, with a reveal and explanation that makes so little sense that it deflates what otherwise could have been a poignant and devastating moment. That mystery is the propelling force in the narrative, and when it falls apart in such a peculiar way it ends up tainting much of the experience. It's silly and abrupt, and the characters – who we've seen handle so many other situations with candor and raw emotion – unpack it all in a way that rings false. Games like these live and die on the strength of their storytelling, and when the last 20 minutes land with a thud, it obscures the greatness of what came before.

I played through the game once and was disappointed by its unsatisfactory ending. After running through it again and making different choices, I have a better appreciation for how well the dialogue is crafted and delivered, even if the mystery's resolution was just as flat the second time around. My initial feeling of "That's it?" gave way to a bittersweet feeling that, just as in real life, "That's it?" is sometimes all there is.

» Jeff Cork

Plants Vs. Zombies: Garden Warfare 2

Beginning to bloom

8

Style 1 or 2-Player Shooter (24-Player Online) **Publisher** Electronic Arts **Developer** PopCap Games **Release** February 23 **Rating** E10+

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Continue the bizarre, but surprisingly functional adaptation of Plants vs. Zombies into the shooter genre

» Graphics
Seeing Plants vs. Zombies' charming art style in high-definition 3D graphics is still a treat, and the new character designs are great

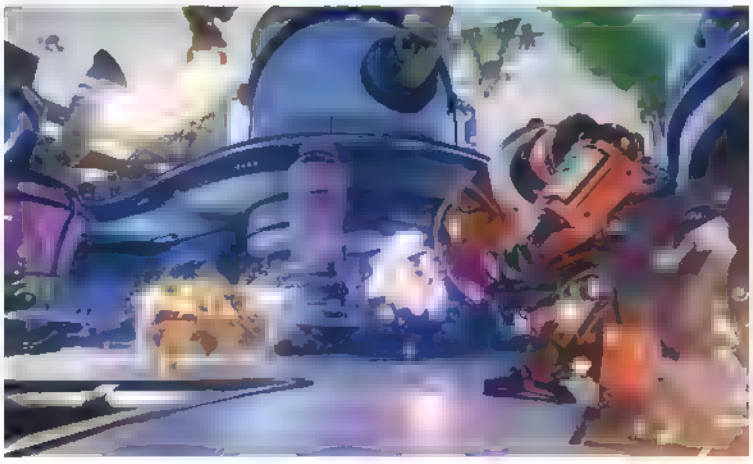
» Sound
The pop adaptions of familiar classical music and fun sound effects make it worth keeping the volume up

» Playability
The shooting and use of special abilities feel smooth even though the accuracy of your aim is secondary to using your abilities properly

» Entertainment
Garden Warfare 2 is an undeniably fun shooter that, unlike the first entry, offers a lot more to do alone or with a couch player

» Replay Value
High

With a sequel firmly cementing its status as a series and not just a strange one-off, Garden Warfare continues to be an unexpected experience. The humorous tower-defense series that birthed the world and characters of Plants vs. Zombies initially didn't seem suited for the shooter treatment, and with the issues plaguing the first game this may have been the case. Garden Warfare 2 fixes many of the problems that dragged down the first game, leading to a much fuller experience with lots of worthwhile new content.



The core Garden Warfare 2 experience is mostly unchanged from the previous game. Every class on each side of the war has distinct abilities that players unleash to take out members of the opposing team, or defend points. The gunplay is simplified compared to the shooters Garden Warfare 2 intentionally references, but it's in favor of a more inviting experience and I appreciate it for that reason.

Both the plants and zombies have new classes, alongside those returning from the previous game. The new classes have entertaining abilities like turning your opponent into a goat, or calling in a Titanfall-like mech for a temporary boost. Having the familiar classes from the previous game is welcome, and being able to bring most of your unlocks forward is a nice bonus. Kernel Corn and Captain Deadbeard quickly rose to the top of my list of favorite new characters, the former is able to call in an airstrike with a pad of butter and the latter can infiltrate the enemy as an explosive barrel. The newcomers are far from reskinned or slightly adjusted versions of familiar classes.

Your main focus is collecting coins to buy randomized packs of cosmetics, inventory items, and new sub-classes. Opening up a blind bag of unlockables and discovering a prize is exciting, but I found myself focusing on a few classes I enjoyed and frequently got unlocks for characters I had little interest in using. The inventory items, which are used like stationary turrets or other helpful items, are also earned from card unlocks and continue to feel unnecessary. They offer a tease of tower-defense mechanics in the online battles, but they do so little to sway the combat that I rarely used them, and strangely felt guilty as though I was wasting them whenever I did.

The number of modes has increased, offering new twists on familiar shooter game-types, but the best are the ones that embrace the strange. One mode has you guarding points along a long level, culminating with each team trying to roll giant balls into goals. It surprised me in the best way the first time I experienced it, and I continued to enjoy the weird pop-up sports game every time it appeared.

A major complaint of the first game was its lack of single-player content, but this entry has much more to do as a lone player. Examining your progress, jumping into multiplayer, and looking at your unlockables all take place in a large open area you can explore. It goes a long way in making the strange, possibly future post-apocalypse setting feel like a real place. Garden Warfare 2 also adds campaigns for both the zombie and plant sides of the war, each with a worthwhile unlockable mode at the end. You won't find much of a story or flashy cutscenes in either campaign, but they each give you a chance to learn the game on your own terms.

Garden Warfare 2 is active and engaging throughout. Finding challenges to take on, even when you don't want to play online, is easy, and everything feeds into your leveling and unlocks regardless of where you are playing. The new classes add worthwhile abilities (and character designs), the new modes keeping things moving (and are often weird), and the combat is interesting, without venturing into the cumbersome or complicated.

• Kyle Hilliard

Unravel

A poignant journey with an endearing, undersized hero

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Electronic Arts **Developer** Coldwood Interactive **Release** February 9 **Rating** E

7.75

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
Create a physics-based platforming/puzzle game with emotional depth

» **Graphics**
The lighting and realistic visuals sell the sense of exploration and discovery

» **Sound**
A wonderful orchestral score bolsters action sequences and touching moments alike

» **Playability**
The physics can be a bit wonky at times, but the platforming feels good

» **Entertainment**
While the puzzles get repetitive, the ever-changing environments and heartfelt narrative see you through to the end of the journey

» **Replay Value**
Moderately low

Yarn-based characters have been a surprising trend in recent years, thanks to playful platformers like Kirby's Epic Yarn and Yoshi's Woolly World. While Nintendo's crocheted protagonists and the worlds they inhabit are brimming with unbridled joy, Unravel strikes a bittersweet tone. With little more than a silent protagonist, a grand orchestral score, and a few excerpts of exposition, Unravel delivers style and soul, even if the puzzle mechanics are threadbare.

Unravel stars Yarny, an anthropomorphic yarn doll who travels back through the memories of an elderly woman. The string from Yarny's body constantly unravels as he navigates the environments, and serves as the primary mechanic for solving puzzles. The first few levels of Unravel are filled with wonder. You swing from branches, build yarn bridges, and bounce your way over obstacles. Much of the gameplay is reminiscent of LittleBigPlanet, but Unravel benefits from tighter platforming controls, and the realistic environments sell the fantasy of being a little character exploring a big, dangerous world.

Unfortunately, the sense of discovery and awe is fleeting. While each level takes you through a different chapter in the elderly woman's life (with new settings, emotional themes, and obstacles), your solutions are always the same. You continually roll around rocks, apples, and snowballs to hop over high ledges, and slide objects up and down your constructed yarn bridges – usually to also hop over high ledges. None of Unravel's puzzles are particularly challenging; the few times I got stuck it was from overthinking the problem at hand.

Without evolving gameplay mechanics, Coldwood Interactive instills a sense of progress on by introducing more difficult action sequences and deadly objects. Unravel's checkpoints are generous, but since most dangers kill you in a single hit, some frustrating sections kill you repeatedly before you get the timing of Yarny's actions just right.

Despite the puzzle repetition, the changing environments and story kept me engaged with the adventure. Each level fills in the elderly woman's photo album with images from her past along with light exposition of her (and Yarny's) emotional journey. The narrative has some ambiguity, conveying themes of love, loss, and coming to peace with the past – both through the expanding photo book and through the tone of the levels you visit.

With just a dozen levels, Unravel's brief six-hour runtime still proves too long for the basic puzzle mechanics. However, the satisfying platforming, thoughtful story, and adorable protagonist make it a worthwhile journey. I grew tired of repeating the same puzzle solutions, but seeing Unravel through to the end was still a treat.

» Jeff Marchiafava

The Flame In The Flood

Survival of the fittest at its best

9

gamerinformer GOLD

Style 1- Player Action **Publisher** The Molasses Flood **Developer** The Molasses Flood **Release** February 24 **Rating** NR

Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Test your survival skills on a downriver trip rife with danger

» Graphics
A beautiful painted style and a load of environmental variety result in a feast for the eyes

» Sound
The combination of a beautiful acoustic soundtrack and the sounds of nature make the game a joy to listen to

» Playability
Exploring and scavenging supplies is fun, but minor glitches occasionally disrupt the experience

» Entertainment
This challenging voyage makes for one of the most memorable and satisfying survival games in the last few years

» Replay Value
High

The sun is sinking beneath the tops of the trees. A few days back you ate some rotten meat, and now you've got dysentery. A dog (your only companion in the wilderness) is whimpering at your side as you lay on a raft. You've been here a hundred times, and you'll probably be here a hundred more. But it's okay. Every life, you're making it closer to the end, dragging your broken bones to the Promised Land inch by inch. You'll get there one day.

The Flame in The Flood is a different kind of game. It requires patience and careful planning on the part of the player, a willingness to learn from mistakes, but it also expects them to have quick reflexes and be capable of making snap judgements. You play as a young woman named Scout navigating the American wilderness with her dog in the aftermath of a seemingly apocalyptic flood. She's trying to reach the end of a river with a slapped-together raft while making frequent stops at islands and inlands to hunt for items necessary for survival. I died hundreds of times during my journey, but each little death taught me new tricks that helped me avoid making fatal errors further down the river, resulting in moments of deep satisfaction where I felt I had truly earned my victories.

The locations you can explore are impressively detailed and diverse. I came across abandoned towns, bait shacks, and camp yards during my travels. While on land, you must scrounge for firewood, food, and crafting materials, all while keeping an eye out for traps and dangerous animals. Vipers, bears, and wolves are hiding and waiting to attack. The Flame in the Flood has no real combat system, so fighting these predators one-on-one isn't really an option; you have to retreat or use traps to catch them. The materials needed to make traps are difficult to find, but if you manage to kill a wolf with one, you're rewarded with enough meat to keep your belly full for days. Scavenging isn't the busywork it could be; instead, it plays out like you're navigating a minefield, carefully tiptoeing around fatal dangers to earn the most precious commodity of all: more time. It's exciting and rarely filled with frustrating or dull lulls in action.

Once you've scavenged and have caught some rest by a campfire or taken shelter from the rain, it's back on the river again, where you're twisting and turning your way around rocks in a cleverly devised, reflex-based mini-game. If you take enough damage from hitting rocks, the raft falls apart and Scout drowns, so you must constantly repair the vessel and upgrade it with enhancements (like an overtop to keep you out of the rain). These arcadey river sections provide a different kind of joy to the calculated, slower-paced land sections and, as vastly different as these two chunks of the game are, they come together surprisingly well to create an enjoyable and challenging experience bolstered by a fantastic acoustic soundtrack.

The Flame in The Flood strikes a balance between the intimidating difficulty of other survival games and being a welcoming experience. Campaign mode functions both as a satisfying adventure in a gorgeous, Americana-style environment and a tutorial for those who want to put their skills to the test in endless mode. That's where players try to survive for as long as they can, with their score ultimately being how far they make it down the river before they expire. Though campaign mode is far from toothless, with sickness and predators lurking around every corner, the checkpoint system is generous, allowing you to restart from the last region of the river you've cleared instead of going all the way back to the beginning.

A sense of mystery lurks under your actions too, as interacting with the world's few denizens results in them spewing cryptic prose poems about the state of the world before the flood. However, the game doesn't bother to answer most of the questions it poses. Why is Scout here? Are we truly navigating the post-apocalyptic South or is this some sort of spiritual limbo? Is Scout damned in some way, doomed to repeat the same cycle until she finally reaches the end of the river through sheer willpower? While I'm usually one for this method of breadcrumb storytelling, I didn't care about why I was going downriver – partially because said crumbs were uninteresting, and partially because I got so caught up in the survival experience itself. I didn't feel the need to seek out an explanation.

The Flame in the Flood has a beautiful aesthetic and a strong structure, welcoming a larger audience with its accessibility options. The trip down the river is a rocky, dangerous one, but there are rich treasures and exciting tales waiting to be discovered by those brave enough to take the journey.

» Javy Gwaltney

Hex: Shards Of Fate

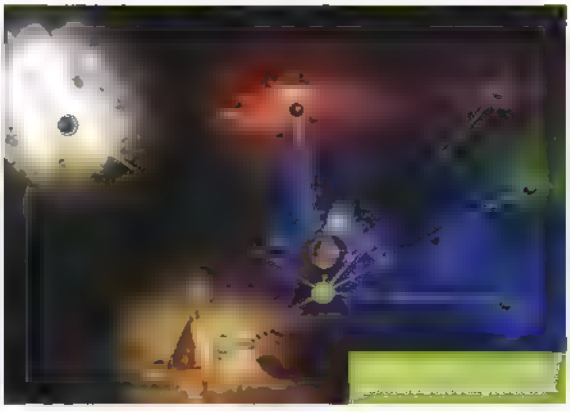
Mixing campaigns and competition

gamefan SILVER

Style 1-Player Strategy (2-Player Online) **Publisher** Gameforge
Developer Hex Entertainment **Release** January 26 **Rating** NR

8.75

PC



» **Concept**
Provide a traditional competitive trading card game environment along with a RPG-centric single-player campaign

» **Graphics**
Cool artwork helps bring each race to life, and the various game boards are interesting

» **Sound**
Nothing awe-inspiring, though each card brings with it sounds to sync up when it hits the table

» **Playability**
The campaign provides an excellent point of entry for anyone getting into the genre, and it has plenty of complexity to satisfy even the most voracious trading card game fans

» **Entertainment**
Planning the perfect build in PvE is extremely satisfying, and participating in PvP fare like draft is exciting and addictive

» **Replay Value**
High

Hex: Shards of Fate features everything you'd expect from a free-to-play trading card game: tournaments, drafting, sparring, and an auction house to sell cards and packs. But Hex also features a heavy PvE environment in the form of a campaign and arena that allows players to level up heroes, selecting talents and specializations with various race/class combos, and travel around a map collecting packs and currency. This world features overworld encounters and dungeon crawls, and players take on everything from puzzle-like encounters to standard beat-down brawls. The PvE content and drafting opportunities are the most compelling offerings Hex has on display, and they're both a blast to engage with.

Hex provides interesting ways to play even for seasoned trading card game fans, whether you're looking to load up your opponent's deck with a ton of spider eggs fueled by the arachnid Vennen, lead a swarm of bunny-based samurai to victory with the Shin'hare, or use the power of prophecy to create a powerful shifting deck with the Coyotle's powers of foresight. Many of these avenues take advantage of the fact that Hex is a digital-only offering; it would be practically impossible on a tabletop to track the insertion of spider eggs and other random effects that add significant zest to the game.

In addition to unique class mechanics like cleric blessings and warrior brawls, equipment slots add yet another layer of customization and complexity to the game. Players find weapons and armor as rewards from their travels, and slot them into the paper doll. Unlike classic RPGs, this gear doesn't add more hit points or damage to your hero. Instead, it adds special effects to specific cards in your deck. These can be insanely powerful (like doubling the effect of a spawning Shin'hare or turning cards in your hand to life gain sources), incentivizing players to use cards they might not otherwise, or facilitate new playstyles and deck options. This additional layer feels great on top of the other decisions in deckbuilding and talent-selection for adventuring and dungeon-crawling.

The campaign experience takes a fairly standard fantasy approach, with a basic story and standard quests. Things are tied to your race and faction, which changes who you interact with and where you travel, making it worth your time to explore several different characters. Players that already have huge collections will find the existing campaign fairly easy with full resources at their disposal, but I chose to tackle the content with the fresh decks provided for the campaign, using only what I found and collected during my travels. This made for a fun progression experience that occasionally had me repeating content to acquire more cards, but it was fun to complete the encounters with a limited and slowly-growing selection of tools.

Most encounters are entertaining and offer variety. A handful are frustrating, like the Wormoid desert, or those that basically require you to pull a perfect hand (which means you chain-concede until you have the right stuff). You have an unlimited number of attempts at overworld content, but in dungeons you have only a certain number of lives to complete the entire thing for rewards – a neat mix that allows both experimental play in the overworld and rewards careful planning for a romp with burning zombies or toxic goblins.

Hex has been rolling out sets of cards for a while now, and these are where players not interested in the PvE portion have been coming for some time. The selection of modes is robust, from large constructed-deck tournaments to on-the-fly sealed deck and draft offerings. One of the things I found frustrating in the traditional tournament formats is when you're between rounds, you're unable to open packs, play PvE, or do much of anything else within the client. You're essentially trapped waiting for the clock to tick down to the next round; it would be nice to be able to enjoy the other aspects of the game while waiting around. There are also a number of UI quirks and the occasional freeze to deal with, but it's nothing dealbreaking.

Hex lacks some of the features initially promised in the Kickstarter campaign, like multi player raids, guilds, mercenary allies, and "endgame" PvE content. Even without those features, it is a well-designed, robust digital trading card game with a wealth of exciting content offerings. With several sets that take advantage of the digital-only environment and an enjoyable campaign already available, the future looks incredibly bright for this card-slinging soiree. » Daniel Tack

XCOM 2

Resistance might be futile, but it's fun

9.5

gamesinformer GAME OF THE MONTH gamesinformer GOLD

Style 1 or 2-Player Strategy Publisher 2K Games
Developer Firaxis Games Release February 5 Rating T

PC

» Concept
Aliens have taken over the world and your ragtag band of revolutionaries is all that can stop them from corrupting the human race

» Graphics
Procedurally generated levels feature a lot of great details – like scars on characters who have been critically wounded – that help bring the world to life

» Sound
The main theme is solid, but the music feels underutilized. Multiple language options for international squadmates is a nice addition, however

» Playability
A lack of controller support is unfortunate, but XCOM's mouse/keyboard interface remains intuitive. Firaxis' layered strategy is deep enough that it might take newcomers a while to master the ins-and-outs

» Entertainment
Alien firefights play out like deadly games of chess. The difficulty tests your resolve, but XCOM remains one of the deepest and most rewarding strategy games on the market

» Replay Value
High

XCOM has never pulled its punches. The series has continually pitted hapless humans against a blitzkrieg of technologically superior alien invaders. In fact, so many players failed to save Earth during their playthroughs of 2012's XCOM: Enemy Unknown that Firaxis was inspired to dream up a dark future where the aliens actually won.

In XCOM 2's bleak fiction, small bands of human rebels have become the interlopers, and they are attempting to overturn a corrupt system and stop the aliens from exploiting the human race. It's an intriguing premise, and XCOM 2 lives up to its legacy of unforgiving challenge and unparalleled rewards.

Like previous entries in the series, XCOM 2 is divided into two parts. One of the meatiest components is the combat layer, where you manage a squad of up to six rebels who tactically dismantle the alien forces without becoming dismembered in the process. The alien overlords give players plenty of reasons to be terrified. Beastly Berserkers run straight toward your forces, threatening to break your squaddies in half if they get within striking distance. Other enemies, such as the angelic-looking Archons, get stronger as you attack them and can call down a torrent of explosions from the sky. XCOM's battles are so nerve-wracking that, at any given moment, I felt like a single alien attack could dismantle my entire squad. Thankfully, this tension is all part of the fun. Your alien foes are often stronger and better equipped for battle, so you must constantly outsmart them. XCOM 2's combat system gives plenty of options to let you do just that.

The archetypes for all of XCOM 2's squad mates are reminiscent of XCOM: Enemy Unknown. Sharpshooters function a lot like Enemy Unknown Sniper class, while Grenadiers perform a lot like the old Heavy class. However, each class has seen its fair share of improvements and upgrades. Psionic warriors from the Enemy Within expansion have essentially become their own class, and you can now turn any rookie into a psychic powerhouse. XCOM 2's classes feel very balanced, and it's hard for me to pick a favorite because they are all useful.

As your characters unlock more weapon upgrades and class abilities, your pool of available maneuvers grows ever deeper, giving you a wider variety of ways to approach every combat encounter. Do you have your Grenadier remain in an exposed position so he can drop a bomb on three enemies with heavy armor or take cover and fire at the biggest tank, which gives an aim boost to the rest of your squad? Do you have your psionic character stun an enemy for one round or empower your sharpshooter to take another shot? Do you have one of your support characters hack into an enemy turret and control it or lob an EMP grenade at the entire group? I never felt like I could rely on tired tactics because every combat scenario calls for a different approach.

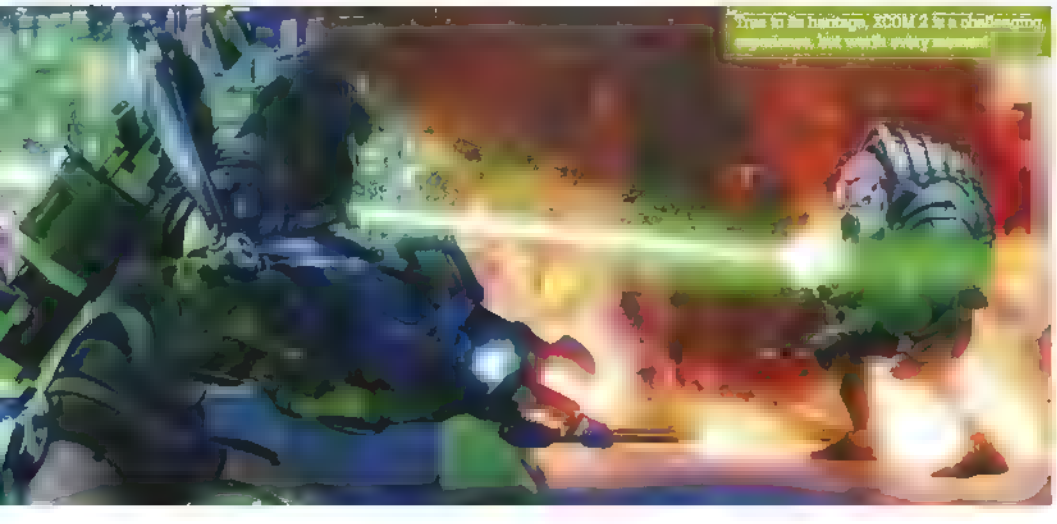
Unlike Enemy Unknown, you begin most battles concealed from your enemies. I appreciated how that gave me time to form a plan of attack, so I didn't always feel like I was just reacting to a series of terrible events. However, some missions force you deeper into the environment in order to complete certain tasks within a set number of turns, and this keeps battles brisk while making it harder to turtle up and play defense on every map. Thankfully, those procedurally generated maps also do a great job of making multiple playthroughs feel unique. Not only does each mission feel like a believable environment, I never felt like a randomized piece of terrain was cheating me from victory.

Between battles, you're pulled back to your home base, a mobile airship called the Avenger. Onboard, teams of scientists and engineers eagerly await your orders to build new tech and research alien artifacts. Much like the combat layer, the Avenger continues to evolve as you journey deeper toward disrupting the alien hierarchy. You can outfit the Avenger with new facilities that allow you to better train your warriors, upgrade weapons and equipment, and patch up soldiers after battle. I never felt like I had enough resources to accomplish all my tasks at once, so I was constantly torn between attending to my soldier's immediate needs and performing research that would bear fruit further down the line.

In the midst of these hard choices, the aliens are performing their own research on a mysterious program called the Avatar Project. In order to investigate this project, you can send your Avenger across the globe, make new connections with local militia leaders, scan for supply drops, or buy and sell goods via an underground market. These events force you into even more strategic choices, and something as simple as selling extra alien alloys can have repercussions down the line. If you dally for too long in completing an essential task, the aliens can complete their project and ultimately win the game.

You're constantly under the gun in XCOM 2, and the deck is often stacked against you. Firaxis' masterclass in strategy design has you second-guessing all your choices and analyzing your smallest decisions. It might sound stressful, and at times it is, but XCOM 2's battles are so compelling that it's easy to pick yourself up after defeat and jump back into the fray. Successfully navigating XCOM 2's storm of difficult choices is enough to make you feel like a true legend.

– Ben Reeves



Fire Emblem Fates: Birthright

Learning the price of victory

gamesinformer GOLD

Style 1-Player Strategy **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Intelligent Systems **Release** February 19 **Rating** T

9.25

3DS

Concept
Fight tactical battles and make hard decisions while forging peace between two kingdoms

Graphics
Character models are fuzzy, but the environments and cutscenes are incredible

Sound
The voice acting is nothing special, but the orchestral soundtrack is fantastic

Playability
Initiative and experimentation are required to learn the systems, but they all snap together in a satisfying way

Entertainment
Birthright takes Awakening's combination of narrative flexibility and tactical strategy and makes it even better

Replay Value
High

What does "family" mean? Is it the people we're related to by blood or is it the ones we grow close to? Fire Emblem Fates, much like its predecessor Awakening, does not shy away from asking hard questions or forcing players into difficult predicaments. This strategy/RPG hybrid puts you in control of a growing army, but your forces aren't composed of nameless infantry units. Instead these soldiers have names, personalities, and are capable of falling in love. They're well-rounded, lovable characters whose very fates lay in your hands.

Fire Emblem Fates succeeds as both a tactics game and a story generator, letting your decisions in and out of battle determine how the lives of these people play out. Perhaps you have to give up your childhood friend's life for the greater good. Maybe you dislike certain characters and deliberately send them to their dooms. Maybe you're just a fantastic commander who can keep every single one of your troops alive and happy. The flexibility of Fates' structure works together with you, so you're constantly spinning a tale; it makes you a general and a storyteller at the same time, and the combination works well.

Birthright is a surprisingly dark epic, with tragic moments that filled me with anger and sadness as I watched my poor protagonist and her siblings undergo trials and lose friends. The story is certainly in the mold of a classic adventure that pits good against evil, but it tethered me emotionally to my band of heroes, misfits, and adopted loners, which made the hard parts of the story devastating and the victories that much more meaningful.

The turn-based battles still rely on a sword-and-spears version of rock-paper-scissors, and play out in well-animated sequences. While this template for tactical combat doesn't reinvent the wheel, the speed and balanced mechanics of these battles makes them both challenging and enjoyable. My favorite change to the classic systems is that weapons (outside of healing spells) no longer have a limited number of uses, saving you from having to go to the store every few battles, which was an absolute pain in Awakening.

If you're playing on Classic mode, a soldier who loses in battle ends up dying and disappears from your playthrough. This adds an edge to battles, raising the stakes and forcing you to make difficult decisions. Players can opt out of this by choosing to play on easier modes (losing is practically impossible in one of them), and this wide range of accessibility lets newcomers engage on their own terms.

The biggest (and coolest) addition to the formula is the castle, which functions as your base of operations. You build shops and recreation areas for your characters, and defenses for the castle itself. This fortress serves as a tangible representation of what you're building throughout the journey and what you're getting for all the sacrifices you make on the battlefield. This is also where you spend time with your troops, and your relationships bloom organically through cute cutscenes that highlight each character's quirks.

Improving your relationships also happens when units fight together; they can get married and have children who suddenly grow into battle-capable adults. It's goofy, but the tactical boon the offspring give you (as well as the sheer delight of seeing your favorite characters fall in love and have a kid) makes that goofiness a small price to pay.

The worst thing I can say about Birthright is that the game doesn't explain its systems particularly well. After an hour-long prologue you don't receive any detailed instruction on how to do anything outside of the occasional castle-related tutorial. The rest is up to you to figure out since certain features, like marriage and children, aren't in the tutorial. Fans of Awakening should pick things up quickly, but series newcomers could easily miss some of the neat features.

Birthright is its own epic saga, with at least 25 hours of playtime and a load of sidequests and goodies to discover during the course of its satisfying and moving story about identity, family, and love. It tricked me into falling in love with its cast of characters and then made me weigh their lives against the fate of the world over and over again. Birthright is a grueling, fantastic experience that not only matches the quality of its predecessor but possibly outshines it as well, more than earning its place at the table of must-play strategy/RPGs. » **Javy Gwaltney**

Conquest: The Other Version

Fire Emblem Fates has two versions: Birthright and Conquest. The differences between the two versions are substantial, but Conquest is great in its own way. It is for players who crave a greater challenge, forcing them to complete more specialized objectives instead of simply clearing the field of enemies. It also doesn't let you grind experience points, meaning you can't level up all your characters into killing machines. This increases the weight of your tactical decisions (especially with permadeath turned on), though easier options are available for players who are only interested in the story. Conquest is a more intense experience, but few things are as sweet as savoring a hard-won victory.

Score: 9.25

the score

8.25 | Klaus

Platform PS4
Release January 19 **Rating** E

Those exhilarating moments of discovery and excitement – the moment you see the approach the designer took – are what will stick with me when I look back on my time with Klaus. – Brian Shea

7.5 | Crashlands

Platform PC, iOS, Android
Release January 21 **Rating** T

The crafting game that could finally appeal to those who've never grasped the genre's charms – Matt Miller

5 | Layers Of Fear

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PC
Release February 16 **Rating** M

In its title, Layers of Fear implies an ability to inspire multi faceted terror. Unfortunately, it only succeeds on the surface level. – Joe Juba

6.5 | The Westport Independent

Platform PC, iOS **Release** January 21 **Rating** NR

The Westport Independent is a great idea, but doesn't have enough content to capitalize on it. More strategy, variety, and rewards would have gone a long way – Kimberley Wallace

7.5 | Sebastien Loeb Rally Evo

Platform PC **Release** January 29 **Rating** E

The amount of tracks and the career structure expose you to more content than most rally titles, even if the racing itself isn't tight enough to compete with the top dogs – Matthew Kato

8 | Homeworld: Deserts Of Kharak

Platform PC **Release** January 20 **Rating** E10+

Deserts of Kharak is a single-player focused RTS game designed for lovers of the waning genre. If that's what you're looking for, it won't disappoint. – Daniel Tack

7 | The Walking Dead: Michonne

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PS3, 360, PC **Release** February 23 **Rating** M

Unfortunately, the first episode spends a lot of time focusing on people who are not Michonne and just aren't that interesting to begin with. – Javy Gwaltney

6.75 | Project X Zone 2

Platform 3DS **Release** February 16 **Rating** T

Finding and using familiar characters is the exciting part of diving into Project X Zone 2, but it is also a clear crutch the game leans on to keep you interested. – Kyle Hilliard

7.5 | Pony Island

Platform PC **Release** January 4 **Rating** NR

Pony Island's novelty doesn't lie in its gameplay…the main draw is the entertaining Da Vinci Code *style mystery looming beneath the idyllic and carefree veneer. – Jeff Marchiafava*

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Pokémon Red & Blue

A look back at the first step in the 20-year journey to catch 'em all

by Kyle Hilliard

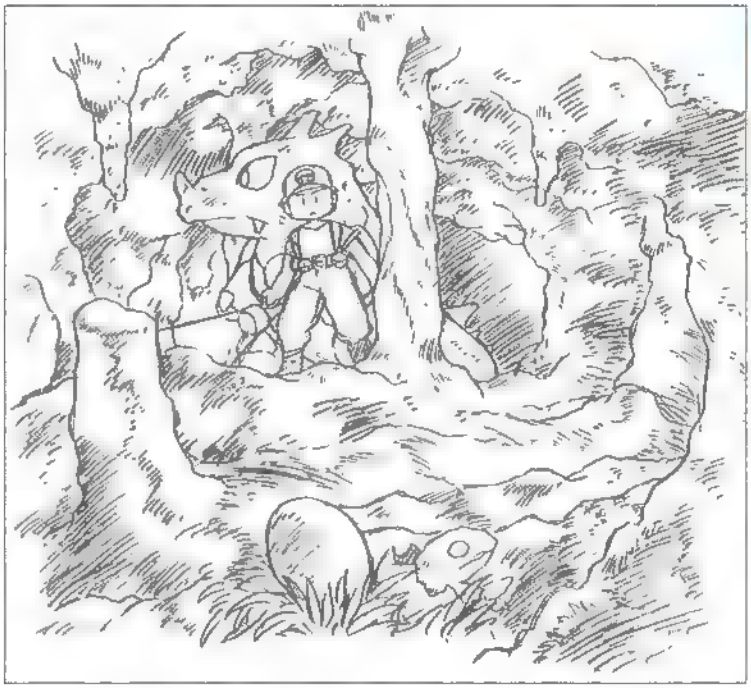
Pokémon is a massive franchise. The series is celebrating 20 years, and more than 200 million Pokémon games have been sold over the course of its two-decade tenure. The Pokémon Company has become one of Nintendo's most important partners and the two are celebrating the Pocket Monster legacy in 2016 by finally, after years of fan demand, releasing the original Pokémon games, Red, Blue (and Yellow) on 3DS Virtual Console.

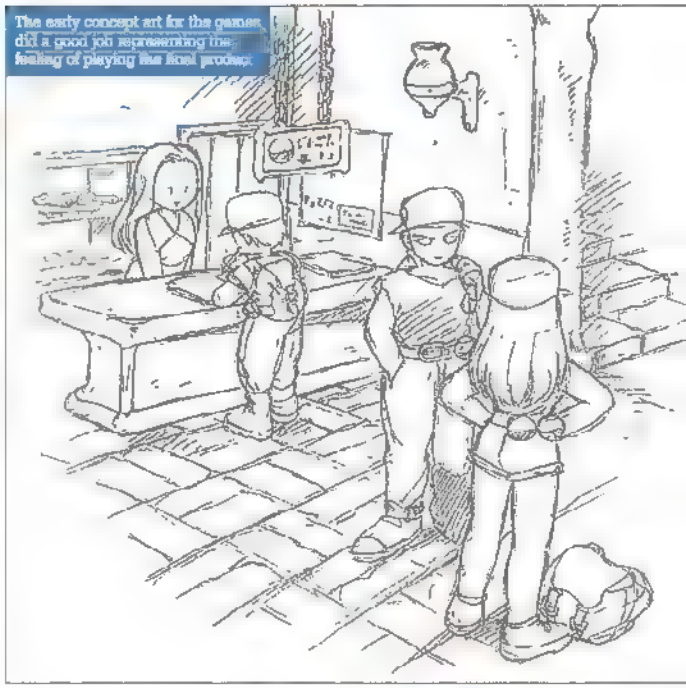
Originally released in Japan in 1996 as Pokémon Red and Green, the series took two years to make its way to North America. The game was developed by Game Freak and directed by Satoshi Tajiri, who is credited as the main inspiration, creator, and driving force behind the original games and the Pokémon franchise.

Tajiri has cited a handful of important influences on the ideas that fostered the creation of Pokémon. As a child, Tajiri collected bugs and insects, a popular pastime for Japanese children. In a 1999 *Time* magazine interview, Tajiri's father said his friends used to call him Dr. Bug. This is where the core idea of collecting Pokémon came from. The mechanic of collecting Pokémon in Pokéballs came from the popular Japanese television show, *Ultraman*, who kept creatures in small capsules to be produced for combat when he needed them.

Junichi Masuda worked on the first Pokémon games as a composer and programmer, but today works as a producer and director on assorted core Pokémon entries. He spoke with *Gamasutra* in 2009 about another important aspect of Pokémon: the trading. "When Mr. Tajiri went to talk to [Nintendo], Mr Miyamoto actually suggested, 'How about creating different cartridges? There are different Pokémon on each cartridge, and people are willing to trade the Pokémon.'"

The original Pokémon games were in development for six years – an



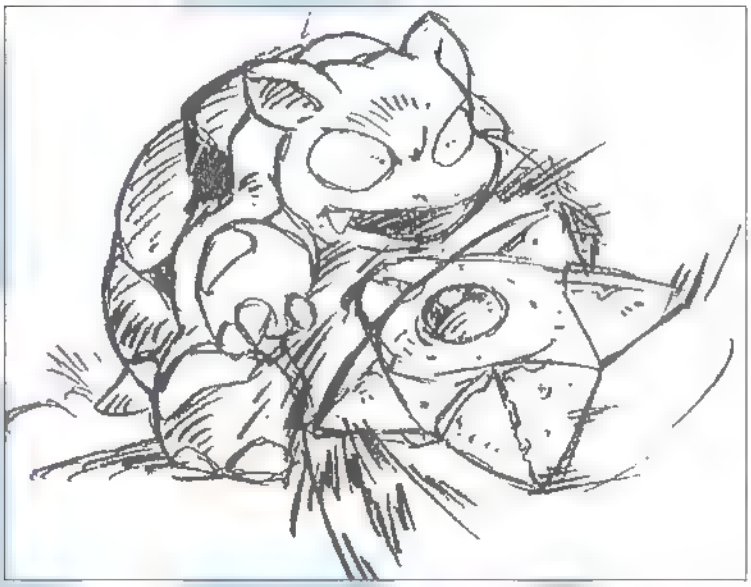


The early concept art for the games did a good job representing the feeling of playing the final product.

incredibly long development period even by today's standards. In a recent Pokémon Company video discussing the development of those games, Masuda reminisced about the difficulty of the project. "I remember my computers always overheating and breaking down on me," Masuda said, "I would work hard to fix them, and eventually we managed to complete the first Pokémon games, but I think I went through four computers by the end."

Broken computers weren't the only barrier nearly preventing Pokémon from releasing and becoming the franchise it is today. In a 2010 Iwata Asks interview with Pokémon Company president and CEO Tsunekazu Ishihara and programmer Shigeki Morimoto, Ishihara said the game was actually completed in October of 1995, but its release was pushed back. "We missed the end of year sales season and finally released the games at the end of February of the following year – the very worst time of year to release games!" It was also believed by many at the time that the Game Boy had completed its lifecycle by 1996.

Pokémon proved the Game Boy still had legs, but both Ishihara and Nintendo's Satoru Iwata attribute the game's massive success and unexpected sales to a surprising source: a specific Pokémon. "I think one reason is the power of word of mouth," Ishihara told Iwata. "In 1996, people weren't writing their own Internet blogs, but word steadily spread about how much fun Pokémon was. There was also the small matter of Mew, the Pokémon that Morimoto-san contrived as a kind of prank."



Mew was added in to the game very late in development, despite the debug team widely demanding the game no longer be tampered with. It also didn't help that the cartridge was nearly full thanks to all of the abundant content. Mew was added in anyway, without specific plans for reveal. Despite the efforts to hide the 151st Pokémon, a difficult-to-recreate bug made it show up in some people's games, which created widespread rumors and excitement. "It looked like we planned all of this, but that wasn't the case. So although it caused all sorts of problems to many concerned, fortunately enough it ended up having a positive effect," Morimoto told Iwata.

Once the rumor started spreading, Nintendo partnered with the Japanese publication *CoroCoro Comic* to hold a contest to distribute Mew to 20 players. 78,000 players entered the contest, and the winners had to send in their game cartridge to receive Mew. "The monthly sales we'd had up to then began to be equaled by weekly sales, before increasing to become three then four times larger," Ishihara told Iwata.

Between the three versions of the game, Red, Blue, and the Japan-exclusive Green, the franchise's cardinal entry went on to sell more than 20 million copies across the world. The Game Boy game was the starting line for what has turned into a ubiquitous multimedia powerhouse of video games, anime, movies, toys, and card games. As the franchise prepares to enter the mobile space with Pokémon Go, a physical Pokémon gym opens in Japan, and the Tekken crossover fighting game Pokkén approaches release on Wii U, the pocket monster juggernaut shows no sign of slowing down.

Red, Green, Blue, and Yellow

Pokémon Red and Green released in Japan in February 1996. The game went through a protracted localization process, and in September 1998, Pokémon Red and Blue released in North America. The North American version of the game featured some improvements and changes, so as a result, Japanese players could order a re-localized version of Blue through the mail. It was not sold in stores. Pokémon Yellow was an improved version of Pokémon Red, Blue, and Green with a focus on Pikachu and released in Japan in 1998 and North America in 1999.

TEST YOUR GEARS KNOWLEDGE

Huge fan of Gears of War? Time to prove it by answering these questions.

1. What song plays in the original television ad for the first Gears of War?
   - **A.** "Don't Stop 'Til You Get Enough" – Michael Jackson
   - **B.** "No Rain" – Blind Melon
   - **C.** "Mad World" – Gary Jules
   - **D.** "Black Hole Sun" – Soundgarden

2. What's the series' shotgun called?
   - **A.** Mulcher
   - **B.** Muncher
   - **C.** Gnasher
   - **D.** Pulverizer

3. How many Gears of War novels are there?
   - **A.** 2
   - **B.** 3
   - **C.** 4
   - **D.** 5

4. Which studio co-developed Gears of War: Judgment along with Epic Games?
   - **A.** Irrational Games
   - **B.** Iron Galaxy Studios
   - **C.** People Can Fly
   - **D.** Yager Development

5. Which Carmine brother survives the events of Gears of War 3?
   - **A.** Clayton
   - **B.** Anthony
   - **C.** Benjamin
   - **D.** Zackary

6. Carolyn Seymour, who voices Queen Myrrah, also voices a popular character in The Mass Effect series. Which character is it?
   - **A.** Samara
   - **B.** Doctor Chakwas
   - **C.** Aria T'Loak
   - **D.** Chloe Michel

7. What color is the Locust toaster you can find in Gears of War 2?
   - **A.** Pink
   - **B.** Red
   - **C.** Blue
   - **D.** Purple

8. What town was Augustus "Cole Train" Cole born in?
   - **A.** Hanover
   - **B.** Jacinto
   - **C.** New York
   - **D.** Bishop

9. Gears of War Judgment introduced which multiplayer mode?
   - **A.** Execution
   - **B.** Overrun
   - **C.** Warzone
   - **D.** Beast

10. Who wrote the story for Gears of War 3?
    - **A.** Cliff Bleszinski
    - **B.** Karen Traviss
    - **C.** Tom Bissell
    - **D.** Amy Hennig

Answers: 1C 2C 3D 4C 5A 6B 7D 8A 9B 10B

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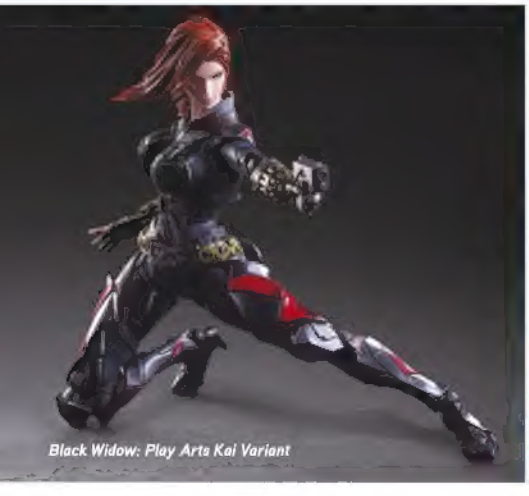

Black Widow: Play Arts Kai Variant

Kylo Ren Movie Masterpiece Series 1/6th Scale Figure

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